

REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

**”Evaluation of Modelling of Services for Children
under three”**

Final Evaluation Report (vol.1)

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The contents of this evaluation report is the sole responsibility of the contractors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of UNICEF.

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ACRONYMS

Acronym	Description
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
CO	Country Office
CNETIF	<i>(Romanian abbreviation for)</i> National Centre for Early Education and Family Information
CPD	Country Programme Document
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CwD	Children with Disabilities
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (of OECD)
DER	Draft Evaluation Report
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ELDS	Early Learning Development Standards
EQ	Evaluation Question
EU	European Union
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
HACT	Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfers
HDI	Human Development Index
HRBA	Human Rights-Based Approach
IDAM	<i>(Romanian abbreviation for)</i> Small Areas Deprivation Index (SADI)
IPP	Institute for Public Policies
IR	Inception Report
KAP	Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices
LPA	Local Public Administration
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MDL	Moldovan Leu
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MoE	Ministry of Education
MSIF	Moldova Social Investment Fund
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NYHQ	New York Headquarters
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PCA	Project Cooperation Agreement
PSE	Preschool Education

SEN	Special Educational Needs
RBM	Results-Based Management
TNA	Training Needs Analysis
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USD	United States Dollar

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document represents the Evaluation Report of UNICEF's "Modelling of Services for Children under three" (hereinafter referred to as "The Project"). The evaluation was conducted between January and May 2016.

Purpose and Objectives of the Evaluation

The **purpose** of this summative evaluation was three-fold: a) to assess the overall end results in relation to the Project objectives; b) to assess the replicability potential of the piloted services for children under three at national level, especially from the perspective of cost-efficiency and sustainability; c) to provide recommendations for future planning and programming of such services, based on documentation of good practices and lessons learnt, both in terms of achieved results and processes which led to these results.

The **objectives** of the evaluation were the following:

1. To evaluate overall Project achievements against planned results
2. To evaluate the sustainability of the Project and the newly established services and the level of institutionalization of good practice
3. To evaluate the capacity of professionals to provide quality services for children under three
4. To evaluate the potential contribution of the Project to future relevant government policy and/or regulations change in regard to services for children under three
5. To evaluate the contribution and engagement of Local Public Administrations (LPAs), caregivers and private sector in the setting up and maintaining the ongoing, quality functioning of services for children under three
6. To evaluate the impact of the Project in ten target communities against a control group
7. To measure the satisfaction of parents in regard to the newly established services
8. To evaluate the needs for future support.

The intended main **users of the evaluation** were UNICEF Moldova Country Office (CO), the Ministry of Education (MoE) and other relevant line ministries, LPAs and other partners and stakeholders at national and local levels.

Evaluation Object

The object of the evaluation was the modelling of services for children under three in ten selected communities in Moldova. The Project aimed to contribute to the improvement of learning and development outcomes for children under three in Moldova, in line with international human rights standards, by achieving three outcomes: increased access to early learning of children under three in target communities; reduced equity gaps in the access of children under three to early learning services in target communities; and improved quality of educational service provision and parenting practices for children under three.

The target groups of the Project included: ten preschools located in target communities which were rehabilitated and endowed to be able to host the piloting of new services for children under three; 45 preschool education professionals (educators, managers, rayon inspectors) and mentors from target communities who were trained in child-centred methodologies and collaborative learning; parents/caregivers of beneficiary children under three who received counseling and training for developing positive parenting practices. The final beneficiaries of the Project were planned to be 200 children under three from ten urban and rural communities.

The Project was implemented by UNICEF Moldova CO in partnership with MSIF and the CNETIF and under the guidance of the Ministry of Education. The Project had an overall duration of one year and five months (November 2013 – March 2015) and a budget of 2,861,124 MDL (approximately 220,320 USD). It has been financially supported by UNICEF (94.6%) with matching funds from national partners (5.4%).

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation applied a **mixed-method approach**, including: stakeholder mapping; mapping of situation and contextual analyses; in-depth documentary review and structured desk analysis of modelling design, implementation approaches, documenting of results and processes; structured desk analysis of policy documents and legislative frameworks; implementation strategies; analysis and testing of the implicit Theory of Change (ToC) for the piloting of services; analysis of results from monitoring and evaluation systems and data

at national and community level; aggregation and analysis of data collected via the structured observation grid; contribution analysis to determine factors which promoted or impeded the progress against intended results and attribution analysis to the extent possible; systems analysis of management, monitoring, quality control and assurance strategies; mapping of risks analyses and mitigation measures; financial analysis; analysis of sustainability strategies and systemic barriers to sustainability; in-depth interviews, focus groups and round table; structured observation during site visits to communities. The evaluation was carried out in three phases. In the **Inception Phase**, review of key documentation and development of data collection and evaluation tools were done. The **Data Review and Collection Phase** was devoted to the in-depth documentary review and collection of data from key stakeholders at central, rayon and community levels during an in-country visit. In the **Synthesis Phase**, the evaluation applied the standard evaluation criteria analysis (relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability) in combination with Human Rights-Based Approach and Results-Based Management in order to assess the achievement of results, draw informed conclusions and provide recommendations which were validated by the key stakeholders during a round table

Main Findings and Conclusions

UNICEF has designed and successfully piloted a model of services for children under three in ten target communities in Moldova with the aim of rolling them out nationally to cover the gap in service provision for this age group. The piloting of the model was instrumental in highlighting what could be done and how, by investing an average amount of 800 USD/child for infrastructure rehabilitation, endowment, capacity building of professionals and empowerment of parents to use positive parenting skills.

The model represents a significant step forward in the process of establishing the underlying framework and practices for broadening the access of children under three to early learning and development. The evidence provided by the model is a powerful tool in the process of advocating for positive changes of policies targeting this age group and corresponding amendments of the existing legal framework. The model is replicable nationally in case there is specific state budget allocation for ECE services for children under three, ring-fenced in the total allocation for preschool education transferred to municipalities. There are good reasons for that, given the very valuable results attained by the model in the target communities and country-wide high demand for such services which is likely to act as a lever for resource mobilisation in the future. Equity and quality should remain at the heart of the rolling out process at national level and measures need to be taken to ensure that the underlying causes of exclusion are addressed and that the service provision strictly comply with quality standards.

More specific findings and conclusions for each evaluation criteria are presented below.

Relevance

The Project was fully in line with the national priorities in the area of preschool education, child protection and healthcare, and international human rights commitments of the country. The piloted services proved to be highly relevant for the needs of children, parents and professionals. The Project has successfully reached children under three living in rural areas where the enrolment rate is two times less compared to the one in urban areas and where the average yearly expenditures per child under three enrolled in preschool education is less than half compared to urban areas. It responded to the need for teacher training in order to build the capacity of educators to work with children under three and apply child-centred teaching methodologies. The piloted services addressed an important challenge of the preschool education in Moldova i.e. lack of basic knowledge and skills of parents/caregivers to cope with parental duties and child developmental needs. From the perspective of local community, the Project was in line with the need to expand the preschool facilities at municipality level (physical space, furniture, equipment, didactical materials, human resources) and thus the coverage of ECE. It remained relevant in time, as demonstrated by the persistently high demand of parents over the lifetime of the piloting period and after.

Effectiveness

Implementation of the model has delivered valuable results in terms of: a) increased access of 246 children under three to early learning opportunities in target communities, especially of children living in rural areas; b) developed positive parenting practices of 133 parents to stimulate child development and provide appropriate nutrition and health care; and c) strengthened capacity of 48 professionals to apply child-centred methodologies in their work with children in the crèche-groups. With few exceptions, the overall effectiveness

level of UNICEF intervention in target communities was found to be adequate and rather close to what was planned by its designers. Effectiveness was increased by the decision to invest in both infrastructure and capacity building, empowerment of both professionals and parents with effective child-centred, respectively positive parenting practices, and blended learning approach which combined classroom trainings with on-the-job mentoring and field monitoring to increase the knowledge and skills of professionals based on the principles of adult education and experiential learning. The factors which hindered the effectiveness of the Project included the insufficient inclusiveness level of the enrolment policy of children under three at the level of beneficiary kindergartens, which left out children with disability/special educational needs (CwD/SEN) and Roma children, on the background of several weaknesses in the design of the Project and financial constraints at local level; staff turnover among trained educators; and insufficient quality safeguards to ensure observance of minimum quality requirements in service provision (in particular the size of the group and staffing).

Efficiency

The model has been implemented in a professional, timely and culturally-sensitive manner, with funds spent in an accountable and cost-efficient way. The average investment/crèche-group was 215,830 MDL (16,588 USD), meaning an initial investment/child (space rehabilitation, endowment, capacity building of staff) of around 10,791 MDL (800.4 USD, 2014 prices). The average value of rehabilitation works per crèche-group was 116,000 MDL, comparable to similar works carried out by MSIF in the country. The overall community contribution amounted to 351,568.96 MDL, representing an average of 25.8% of the total costs of rehabilitation works. In this respect, UNICEF has managed to use its core role of leveraging resources from local communities for the benefit of children under three and their families. The Project had a significant efficiency characteristic given by its very nature, i.e. investment in early childhood education and development, which brings about tremendous returns in the future for the individuals, communities and society generally. Efficiency of monitoring has been impeded by the lack of a clear hierarchy of results in the model design and insufficient attention given to quality and risks monitoring during the piloting of the services.

Impact

The qualitative assessment of impact indicates a positive contribution of the piloted services on the progressive realisation of children's rights. The parents and professionals observed improvements in the social-affective, cognitive and motor development of children enrolled in the crèche-groups, which contributed to enhanced learning and development outcomes of the beneficiary children. A more objective, quantitative assessment of the model contribution to learning and development outcomes was not able to be done due to the lack of key prerequisites and resources explained in the section on limitations of the evaluation. The setting up of crèche-groups has also helped 108 beneficiary mothers to return on the labour market. The Project has a significant potential to influence positive changes of policies targeting children under three and corresponding amendments of the current legal framework. It has already done so in concert with other UNICEF initiatives on ECE, by informing policy inputs and advocacy for the development of the Strategy "Education 2020", Education Code (articles 23-24), the Inter-sectorial Strategy on the development of parental abilities and competencies 2015-2021 and the Action Plan for the implementation of the Child Protection Strategy 2014-2020.

Sustainability

One year after the end of UNICEF support, all ten crèche-groups function at full capacity, with running costs covered by the state budget (via the allocation provided to municipalities for preschool education) and parents. Interviews with rayon Education Directorates and LPAs tend to confirm that the services piloted by the Project are currently part of the regular service provision for children under three in the respective communities. Nevertheless, it is the opinion of the evaluation that support to communities is still needed for increasing access and coverage of vulnerable children in preschool education until solid rights-based foundations of practices and procedures are built and sustainable capacities are in place to ensure that systems run effectively and at the required quality standards. The model has been already replicated in other localities and several new crèche-groups were set up with running costs primarily covered from the state budget allocation for preschool education for children above three, with the tacit agreement of financial authorities. However, rolling it out at national level has a totally different dimension and would require an important financial effort that could no longer be accommodated by the existing state budget allocation and the local communities cannot afford with the existing scarce resources.

Recommendations

The evaluation provides a number of strategic/programming recommendations (SP) and operational (O) recommendations addressed to the Government of Moldova, UNICEF CO and key partners at national and local levels, in line with the ToR and the need to engage all major stakeholders in a concerted effort for the continuation of reforms on the advancement of ECE in Moldova.

A. Recommendations for scaling up the model of services for children under three

SP1: Ensure the prerequisites for the expansion of the model of services for children under three at national level based on a Policy Brief which puts together the evidence of demand and results generated by the piloting, a financial estimate for rolling out the model country-wide (initial investment and operational costs per child), potential financing formulas and sources, and a roadmap including clear milestones and prioritised phases. Other key prerequisites which need to be put in place include an enabling legal framework, equity safeguards, qualified staff and a quality assurance system

(Addressed to: Ministry of Education and UNICEF CO in cooperation with the Parliament and line ministries - health, labour and social protection, kindergartens, pre-service/in-service training providers)

O1: Carry out a quick inclusiveness assessment of crèche-groups in the target communities supported by UNICEF

(Addressed to: UNICEF CO and Ministry of Education)

O2: Conduct a specific costing analysis of unit cost/child enrolled in the crèche-groups piloted by the UNICEF model to serve the rolling out of services nationally

(Addressed to: UNICEF CO and Ministry of Education)

B. Recommendations for the overall improvement of service supply, parenting skills and UNICEF future modelling initiatives

The UNICEF-piloted model is not and should not be the only option for children under three and their parents. It provides an example of possible services that could address the needs. The 'market' of services for children under three should be populated by a range of services, public and private, with various working hours, etc. to ensure flexibility of choice for parents, according to their particular needs. Amendment of the legal and policy framework should make sure that it promotes a flexible supply of services, including private ones which would ease the state financial burden, in concert with changes in the social protection provisions for parents of children under three, as per current Parliamentary initiatives. In this respect, the following recommendations are made:

SP2: Further invest in the expansion and diversification of country-wide, flexible early learning programmes for children under three to ensure higher and more inclusive coverage of vulnerable children in preschool education

(Addressed to: Government of Moldova in partnership with UNICEF CO, municipalities, CSOs and private sector)

SP3: Empower parents/caregivers to become active and efficient partners of the education system in the process of early education and development of children under three

(Addressed to: UNICEF CO in partnership with the Government, kindergartens and CSOs)

O3: Improve the results architecture and evaluability of future UNICEF's modelling initiatives

(Addressed to: UNICEF CO)

Lessons Leant

- 1) Investment in early preschool education should be long-term.
- 2) Early education services for children under three represent a significant breakthrough for child learning and development outcomes, but most vulnerable and neglected children could still be excluded.
- 3) Expansion of early learning opportunities for children under three requires both hard and soft investment.

1. CONTEXT OF THE EVALUATION

Key features of the country context

Moldova is a landlocked, low middle-income country in transition situated in Eastern Europe, bordered to the west by Romania and to the north, east and south by Ukraine. Moldova has population of the 3.5 million people (2015), out of whom around 691 thousand people (19%) are below 18¹. Migration from Moldova has been progressively increasing, with an estimated one third of the working-age population currently abroad.

The transition to a market economy has been slow due to challenges faced in the implementation of economic and social reforms, the collapse of the industrial sector and political tensions, including internal divergences on Moldova's future path and frozen conflict with the breakaway region of Transnistria². Economic growth was 7.1% in 2010, but contracted in the following years, reaching only 3.7% in the third quarter of 2015³. Sustaining growth has been a challenge since GDP gains have been fuelled by remittances and export growth through increased access to external markets, which in turn were subject to the effects of the global financial crisis.

Employment rates in Moldova are among the lowest in Europe, reaching only 39.6% in 2014. In case of women, the level was even lower i.e. 37.4% compared to 42.1% for men. The employment rate was also lower in rural areas: 38% as against 41.8% in urban areas⁴. The unemployment rate was 3.9% in 2014, however unemployment among youth aged 15-24 was 9.8% which is a matter of concern. According to government statistics in 2014⁵, 15.5% of men and 7.8% of women of working age were working abroad or looking for work abroad.

While migration may help reduce the absolute poverty rate among children and increase the level of disposable income of households, it could have a negative impact on children left behind, representing 44.8% (19,700 children) of the overall number of children without parental care in 2015⁶. According to a UNICEF national representative survey, 21% of children has one or both parents living abroad, and 5% of all children have been left behind by both migrant parents, with rural children most affected⁷. Given high rates of male migration and divorce, many households are headed by women, and 22% of children live with their mother only⁸; for low-income single-mothers and their children, social exclusion and deprivation is a concern.

Political instability and slow economic development contributed to high poverty rates, placing Moldova among the poorest countries in Europe, despite important progress in reducing poverty. Moldova's Human Development Index (HDI) value for 2014 was 0.693, positioning the country at 107 out of 188 countries and territories and placing it in the medium human development category⁹. The incidence of poverty (using the international threshold of 4.3 dollars per day) decreased from 34.5% in 2006 down to 20.8% in 2012¹⁰. The share of the population living under the absolute poverty line decreased from 30.2% to 11.4% in 2014. While the absolute poverty fell, the gap between the rural and urban areas

¹ National Bureau of Statistics, <http://www.statistica.md/newsview.php?l=ro&idc=168&id=4779>

² Transnistria is a self-proclaimed independent state situated between the Nistru River and the Eastern Moldovan border with Ukraine. It is not recognised by any of the UN member states and it is designated by the Republic of Moldova as the "Transnistria Autonomous Territorial Unit with special legal status".

³ World Bank country overview, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/moldova/overview>, accessed 31.03.2016

⁴ National Bureau of Statistics, www.statistica.md, accessed 31.03.2016

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Data provided by the Directorate of family protection and children's rights, Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Family

⁷ UNICEF (2014), "Republic of Moldova. Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2012", Final Report, Chisinau

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ UNDP (2015), "Human Development Report 2015. Work for Human Development", New York

¹⁰ Government of the Republic of Moldova (2013), "The Third Millennium Development Goals Report. Republic of Moldova", Chisinau

widened: in 2006, 75.7% of the population living in poverty were in villages, while in 2014 this percentage increased to 84%.¹¹ The most vulnerable groups at risk of poverty in Moldova remain those with low education levels, households with many children, those in rural areas, families relying on self-employment, the elderly, and Roma.

Families with three or more children are the most vulnerable to poverty, the rate for this category being 35% compared to 10% for families with one child¹². The majority of these families live in the rural areas (74.8%, Household Budgets Survey¹³). As far as children only are concerned, the rural-urban gap is illustrated by 38% of children in rural areas living below the poverty line, compared to 13% in urban areas¹⁴.

Moldova has made significant progress in meeting most Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets. The main areas where good performance indicators were achieved include the reduction of extreme poverty and hunger, the reduction of child mortality and the creation of a global partnership for development. The most lagging behind areas are the ones related to the combat of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and other diseases, improvement of maternal health and promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women¹⁵.

The Government of Moldova regards European Union (EU) integration as a fundamental priority of domestic and foreign policy. On the policy level, in the last few years, Moldova has reached a new level in its relations with the EU. A visa-liberalization agreement entered into force in April 2014, and the Association Agreement was signed in June 2014. The agreement reconfirms mutual commitment to support Moldova in strengthening the rule of law, democracy, human rights standards and principles. *The agreement includes a specific chapter on the rights of the child, providing a strategic platform to improve children's protection and development.* To achieve steady progress, the Government of Moldova adopted in 2014 the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Association Agreement, which transposed the provisions of the Association Agreement into concrete actions for the years 2014-2016. Since then, Moldova submits regular reports on the implementation of the EU-Moldova Association Agenda to the EU. However, consensus on Moldova's future path has yet to be achieved, despite the signature of the agreement. Parliamentary elections in November 2014 emphasized diverging views on Moldova's integration into the EU. Political instability is still an issue and negotiations on settlement of conflict between the two sides of the Nistru River has registered limited progress despite confidence-building measures supported by international partners.

Early Childhood Education for children under three

Enrolment rates

Data on education level in the macroeconomic context are a strong argument for advocating for better and stronger support to Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Early Childhood Education (ECE) as several recent studies confirm that investment in early development and education is the best investment for society and individual. The literature makes reference to research and findings of Nobel Prize for Economics James Hackman: *"For each dollar spent on quality programmes for children in*

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Ministry of Economy (2014), "2013 Poverty in Moldova. Brief Note", http://mec.gov.md/sites/default/files/nota-informativa-saracia-si-impactul-politicilor-2013-rom_2.doc accessed on 31.03.2016

¹³ National Bureau of Statistics, www.statistica.md, accessed on 28.03.2016

¹⁴ Government of the Republic of Moldova, UN Moldova, "Towards Unity in Action. United Nations – Republic of Moldova Partnership Framework 2013-2017", Chisinau

¹⁵ Government of the Republic of Moldova (2013), "The Third Millennium Development Goals Report. Republic of Moldova", Chisinau

early age there is return of 17.07% out of which 12.90 to public budget and 4.17% to individual.”¹⁶ ECE is making a tremendous contribution particularly in the case of children from poor and vulnerable families, improving their preparedness for school, and, in the longer term, increasing social mobility and poverty reduction.

In Moldova, attendance figures for children under three are rather low, but are recovering from the negative effects of transition on early childhood services. Places were widely available for children of all ages in most rayons of the country, especially where state industry and collective farms provided buildings and facilities for the children of employees. These facilities and services were heavily reduced after transition, due to the economic depression and withdrawal from a centrally planned economic model. Most crèches and kindergartens closed in the '90s. Demand also dropped given increased service costs, eroding quality and decreasing rates of women's participation in employment. The ECE service provision in Moldova has been progressively increased for the last decade. In 2000, less than half of children aged three to six attended early childhood programmes, while in 2015, the overall enrolment rate had reached 83.9%¹⁷. However, the preschool education system for children under three has not managed so far to provide equal ECE opportunities to all children, although the number of children in preschool institutions increased over the last 15 years (Table 1). The enrolment rate in 2015 was only 14.7% (16,732 children), according to the data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics (Table 2).

Table 1. Children under three enrolled in ECE institutions, 2000-2015

	2000	2005	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Total	13,809	13,275	16,398	17,349	17,240	15,935	16,796	16,732
Urban	8,815	8,390	9,668	10,071	9,896	8,679	9,073	8,907
Rural	4,994	4,885	6,730	7,278	7,344	7,256	7,723	7,825

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2015), "Education in the Republic of Moldova 2014/2015", Statistical publication, Chisinau

Table 2. Children under three attending ECE programmes in 2015

	Total no. of children under three	No. of enrolled children under three	% of children under three enrolled in ECE
Total	113,556	16,732	14.7%
Area			
- Urban	40,806	8,907	21.8%
- Rural	72,750	7,825	10.7%
Type of institution			
- Public		16,713	99.9%
- Private		19	0.1%
- Crèche-kindergartens		14,657	87.5%
- Other (kindergartens, crèches, school-kindergartens)		2,075	12.5%
Age			
- Total	113,556	16,732	14.7%
- 0-1 year	37,944	7	0.01%
- 1-2 years	38,352	864	2.25%
- 2-3 ¹⁸ years	37,260	15,861	42.5%

Source: National Bureau of Statistics

¹⁶ Pašalić-Kreso, A. (2011), "Nauka za predškolsko obrazovanje, predškolsko obrazovanje za nauku" u zborniku "Kvalitet predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja u Bosni i Hercegovini".

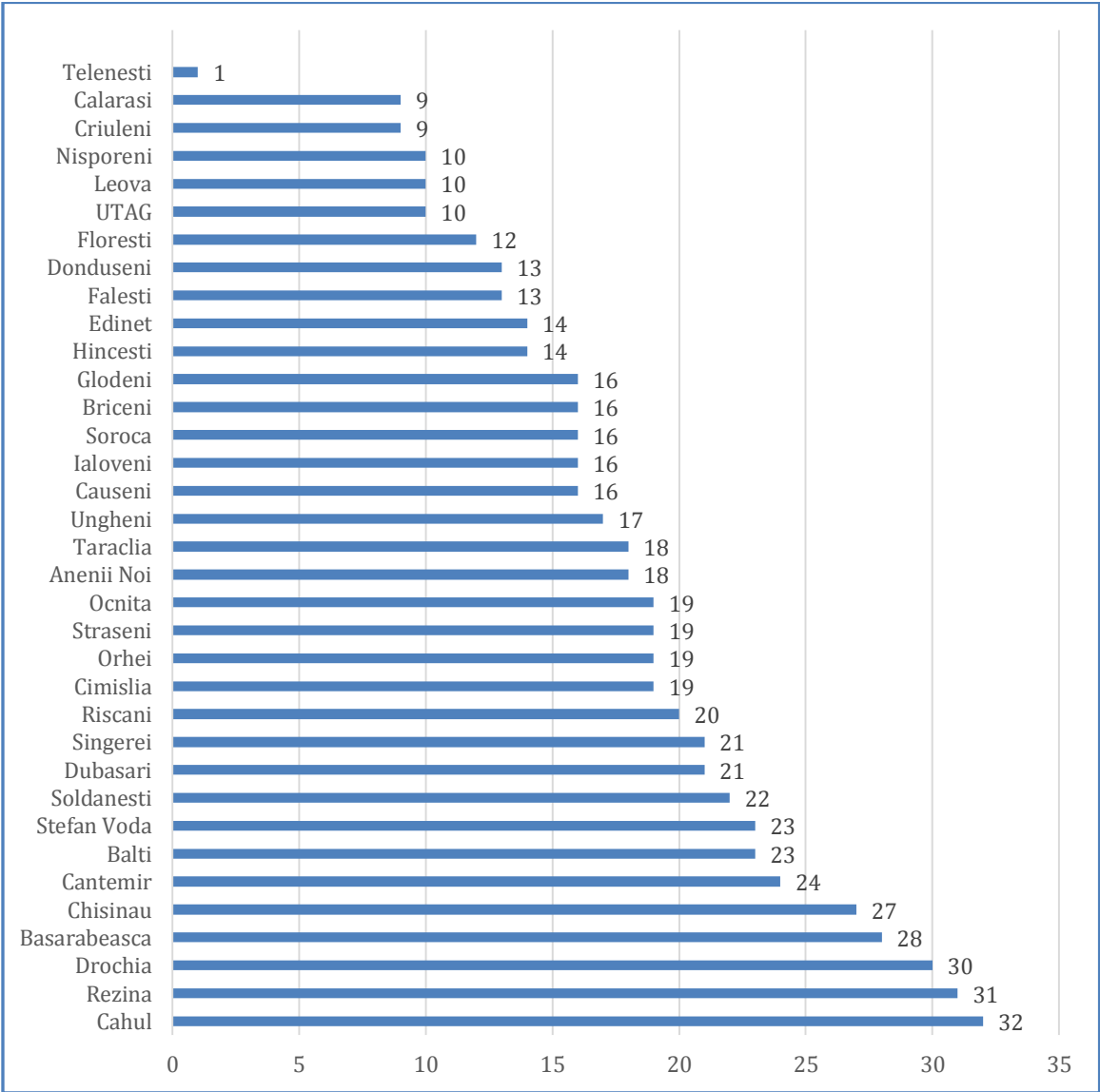
¹⁷ National Bureau of Statistics, http://www.statistica.md/public/files/publicatii_electronice/Educatia/Educatia_RM_2014.pdf, accessed 28.03.2016.

¹⁸ Figures do not include children who turned 3 or more.

The enrolment rate of children living in rural areas is less than half compared to the one of children in the urban areas, depicting the severe urban-rural gap in ECE attendance (Table 2). The highest enrolment rate is among children aged 2-3 years. Children are mainly enrolled in crèche-kindergartens.

The enrolment rate varies tremendously across the rayons, from 1% in Telenesti to 32% in Cahul, affecting the equal access of children under three to early learning services (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Enrolment rate of children under three per rayon in 2014 (%)



Source: Survey data, PwC Data analysis in PricewaterhouseCoopers (2016), “Assessment of the preschool education system and definition of the costing methodology for childcare and education services in the Republic of Moldova” (draft February 2016), Chisinau

According to a study carried out in 2013, there is a high demand for ECE services for children under three, especially due to the willingness of young mothers to return on the labour market¹⁹. Still, only 15% of needs were covered by the existing service provision in 2013. The study highlights the fact that

¹⁹ “The demand for early education services among children under 3 years totals 46% of the number of non-enrolled children (approx. 44,800 children of this ages)”. Source: UN Women, UNICEF (2013), “The Demand and Supply of Early and Pre-School Education Services from the perspective of women’s employability (the case of the Republic of Moldova), Chisinau, page 87.

9 out of 10 women with children under three were not employed due to general lack of jobs, and flexible work arrangements, but also impossibility to enrol their children in an education institution.

The monthly allowance paid to an insured parent during the leave for raising the child until the age of three represents 30% of his/her average income over the last 12 months. In case of uninsured parents, the monthly allowance is a flat sum of 400 MDL (around 20 USD²⁰). This system raises two issues of concern: in the first case, the allowance could have a level below the subsistence minimum²¹ for parents with low salaries; and in the second case, the allowance is paid only until the child is 1.5 years old. According to another study from 2015, a proportion of 64.5% of children under three have uninsured parents and get the allowance until the age of 1.5, thus leaving the families with children between 1,5 and 3 years without any state support or a guaranteed place in the kindergarten²².

The monthly allowance could be paid on the condition that the respective parent does not work or work a limited number of hours at home until the child reaches the age of three. Part-time employment for parents with children below 14 is regulated in the Moldovan Labour Code (article 97) and employers are obliged to provide part-time work opportunities, at request. However, this right is either unknown or rarely requested by the parents.

The main reasons for low coverage of children under three in ECE programmes are the following:

a) Insufficient preschool physical capacities (space, furniture, equipment, didactical materials) to cover the total number of children left out from the ECE system on the background of **sub-optimal use of existing schools buildings**. The highest demand for ECE services is registered in the urban areas, where the preschool institutions which host crèche-groups are overcrowded. In Chisinau, the capital city of the country, the demand exceeds by far the available supply²³.

According to the Ministry of Education, in order to cover the demand to the extent possible, the kindergartens enrol children aged 2-3 (although not at an eligible age²⁴) by increasing the size of existing groups of children aged 3 or more to 35-38 children or even 45 children in some cases i.e. more than two times the legal threshold. Such overcrowding leads to quality loss of the educational process with negative impact on child development. Where space is available for crèche-groups within existing preschool institutions, important rehabilitation investment is needed (also including water and sanitation) along with specific endowment (furniture, toys and didactical materials) which is usually more expensive for children under three compared to 3-7 age group. In Chisinau, there are no available spaces, thus requiring the building of new preschool institutions or an optimal use of the premises of pre-university institutions which are functioning under capacity. In general, the network of preschool institutions are unevenly distributed across the country and do not correspond to existing demand²⁵.

²⁰ Exchange rate at 31.12.2015, <http://www.bnm.org>

²¹ In 2015, the monthly minimum income guarantee was 765 MDL (around 39 USD, exchange rate 31.12.2015, <http://www.bnm.org>).

²² Popescu, C. (2015), "The Reform of the Leave for raising the children aged 0-3/3-6: shorter, better paid, followed by good crèche/kindergarten services", Expert-Grup, Chisinau

²³ According to data provided by the Directorate General for education, youth and sport of Chisinau municipality, 15,808 children under three have been on the waiting list in 2015. Part of these children are not registered as residents in Chisinau, their parents having their official domicile outside Chisinau, but working in the city and living in rented housing.

²⁴ The eligible age for attending the kindergarten in Moldova is 3.

²⁵ "In 2012, 16% of pre-school education institutions had an enrolment of 50% of their capacity, 38% – at 50-90% of their capacity, 10% -- at 90-100% of their capacity, and enrolment rates in 36% of institutions exceeded their designed capacity. In urban localities the enrolment at 60% of institutions is over their capacity compared to 30% in rural area." Source: UN Women, UNICEF (2013), "The Demand and Supply of Early and Pre-School Education Services from the perspective of women's employability (the case of the Republic of Moldova), Chisinau, page 86

The most worrying situation is registered in 155 localities (primarily rural) from 21 rayons (out of 32 in the country) with no ECE service provision for children 0-7²⁶. In this case, children have to travel to neighbouring localities to attend preschool education, but this arrangement is scarcely used by parents of children under three (time consuming, travel costs) who prefer to keep their children at home.

The community centres for early education provide alternative educational services for children, but most of them are targeting children above three. As seen in Table 2 above, there are practically no private preschool institutions due to excessively severe conditions to be met by the owner and the premises as well rigid sanitary-hygienic rules. The legal-normative framework pertaining to registration, licensing, accreditation, and monitoring of private education services is incoherent²⁷.

b) Limited number of qualified/trained staff, primarily kindergarten educators, to work with children under three and apply the Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS) as well as relevant curriculum, which has impeded the setting up of crèche-groups in a large number of kindergartens. At the same time, there is a **high staff turnover** both among educators and educators' assistants, due to low salaries and difficulties in coping with oversized groups of children. The evaluation was informed by the Ministry of Education that in Chisinau, for instance, there is currently a shortfall of 216 educators, 180 assistants and 22 sanitary baby-sitters.

c) Inadequate resources allocated to ECE. According to the Education Code, the responsibility for early education of children under three rests with the parents. Local authorities may set up and run ECE institutions/programmes based on their own financial resources. The development of preschool education in rural areas is difficult due to the limited budget, especially in case of poor communities, and inefficient use of financial resources at local level²⁸. The evaluation was informed by various key informants consulted during the field phase that, in reality, the costs related to the children under three who are attending kindergarten (although not at an eligible age) are covered from the state allocation provided to the respective institution for children above three, which is irregular, but apparently accepted by all stakeholders and known by the Ministry of Finance. When financing is not sufficient, the local authorities may discontinue the functioning of the kindergarten for 1-2 months during winter and/or summer; in other cases, parents are asked to pay a contribution.

d) Limited financial capacity of parents – parents have to pay a monthly contribution to nutrition for the days the child was present in the crèche²⁹; in reality, parents are requested to pay additional money either through the associations of parents or informally as the funds from the local authorities are insufficient to cover the needs (usually for additional food, toys, didactical materials, consumables, etc.). Poor families could be exempted from the payment of the monthly contribution, but the severe qualifying conditions discourage parents to apply and to enrol the child in the kindergarten³⁰. According to a recent study, only 64% of children attend a kindergarten in low-income families, while for higher-income families the percentage is 86%³¹.

²⁶ Data provided by the Ministry of Education

²⁷ UN Women, UNICEF (2013), "The Demand and Supply of Early and Pre-School Education Services from the perspective of women's employability (the case of the Republic of Moldova), Chisinau

²⁸ Government of the Republic of Moldova (2014), Strategy for the Development of Education 2014-2010 "Education 2020"

²⁹ According to the Ministry of Education Order No. 42/28 January 2013, the daily fee for the nutrition of a child of less than 3 years of age amounts to 16.95 MDL, out of which the parents have to cover 5.65 MDL per day.

³⁰ The qualifying conditions to be met by parents are the following: no recipients of social benefit; no employment; no other income sources.

³¹ PricewaterhouseCoopers (2016), "Assessment of the preschool education system and definition of the costing methodology for childcare and education services in the Republic of Moldova" (draft February 2016), Chisinau

e) **Poor awareness amongst Roma parents** of the importance of early learning on the background of persistent **prejudices against Roma children**³². According to key informants consulted by the evaluation, the frequent reason for low attendance of ECE institution by Roma children under three is the traditional belief of Roma parents that the child is too small and has to be permanently taken care of his/her mother; otherwise, the respective mother would be considered a 'bad mother' and rejected by the family or Roma community as a whole.

f) **Insufficient development of inclusive education** to ensure access of children with disability (CwD)/special educational needs (SEN) to early learning programmes. In 2014, a number of 1,500 children under 18 were diagnosed with disability, of whom 65% were from rural areas³³. One in three CwD was 0-2 years old. The lack of knowledge and skills of educators to work with small children with SEN/CwD discourages principals of preschool institutions and parents to enrol these children in available crèche-groups functioning in kindergartens. Moreover, the limited financial resources available for ECE is an additional obstacle for their enrolment, given the fact that such children would require additional staff on the background of already overcrowded crèche-groups. In addition, specific equipment and didactical materials are needed. The lack of disaggregated data concerning CwD/SEN under three attending preschool education is another issue which makes difficult the planning of inclusive education policies.

An area which benefited of increased attention over the last years has been positive parenting for preschool age children, including children under three. Parents/caregivers lack basic knowledge and skills for ECD. Levels of awareness of the child's health danger signs (such as high fever, difficulty breathing or others) are still moderate. Only one third of parents read to their children every day, with significant gaps based on income and gender. Fathers in the poorest and rural families are far less likely to engage with their children in learning, reflecting continued social norms (29% in 2012³⁴). Children under one are beaten in 16% of cases³⁵. Parenting interventions supported by UNICEF have reached over a 1,000 communities in Moldova tackling these gaps and equipping fathers and mothers to use positive parenting techniques³⁶.

Legal and strategic framework

The main policy framework setting the direction for education comprises the **Strategy for the Development of Education 2014-2020 "Education 2020"** and the recent **Education Code** adopted late 2014. Both documents include specific provisions aimed to orient and regulate the education of children under three as far as the organisation, functioning and funding are concerned. The aim is to promote child-centred early learning, based on a modernised curriculum, better qualified teaching staff and positive parenting.

Apart from the main policy framework, other laws and strategies relevant to early childhood education and care are the following:

- Consolidated strategy for the development of education 2011-2015
- Child Protection Strategy 2014-2020
- National Health Policy (2007-2017)

³² See, for instance, UN Moldova (2013), "Roma in the Republic of Moldova living in Roma densely-populated communities", Chisinau; UNICEF Moldova (2015), Report "Participatory Evaluation of Barriers for Roma Children and Their Families to Access Services", Qualitative Sociological Study, Chisinau

³³ National Bureau of Statistics (2015), "Situation of children in the Republic of Moldova in 2014", Chisinau

³⁴ UNICEF (2014), "Republic of Moldova. Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2012", Final Report, Chisinau

³⁵ UNICEF Moldova (2010), "National Survey on Early Childhood Care and Development: Family Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP)", Chisinau

³⁶ UNICEF Moldova (2015), "Situation of children and women in Moldova", Update for the Mid-Term Review of the UNICEF and Republic of Moldova Country Programme 2013-2017 (internal document)

- Strategy for the health, development and welfare of children and adolescents 2015-2020 (draft, 2015)
- Strategy for the social inclusion of persons with disabilities (2010-2013)
- Programme for the development of inclusive education 2011-2020
- Law concerning the special protection of children under risk and children separated from their parents (2013)
- Family Code (2001)
- Inter-sectorial Strategy on the development of parental abilities and competencies 2015-2021

Universal principles of human rights are built in the overall legal framework covering education, health and social protection in order to comply with the requirements and recommendations of international conventions and charters. From an education perspective, the international commitments of the country primarily derive from the ratification of the **Convention on Rights of Children** in 1993. In its Concluding Observations (February 2009)³⁷, the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern on the reduced access to education of Roma children and the inadequacy of educational, social and health services for CwD and their families. The Committee recommended that measures are taken to provide equal education opportunities to these children as well as the development, funding and provision of parent-training programmes for parents from vulnerable families. Since 2009, Moldova has made progress in both areas, particularly in positive parenting.

Institutional Framework

The development, implementation and monitoring of national policies in the area of early education and care are done by the **Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Family**. Applicable quality standards are also developed by the central public administration.

The **National Council for Child Rights Protection** has the mission to ensure the development and implementation of policies to protect the rights of children and women in compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, other relevant international documents to which Moldova is a party and national legislation on child and family protection. Being composed of representatives of line ministries and alliances of CSOs working in the field, the Council promotes cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination for the development of strategies and government programmes on child and family protection.

At rayon level, the preschool institutions are coordinated from a methodological point of view by 33 **Education Directorates**. **Local governments** play a significant role in setting up and funding the ECE service provision for children under three. At the moment, they are underfinanced and the coverage and quality of their services, including for ECE, require significant improvement within the overall local governance reform.

In 2014, Moldova had 1,453 preschool institutions, a 8.9% increase compared to the 2007 level. Preschool education for children under three was provided primarily in 838 crèche-kindergartens³⁸.

³⁷ Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009), "Concluding observations: Republic of Moldova", Fiftieth session, CRC/C/MDA/CO/3

³⁸ National Bureau of Statistics (2015), "Education in the Republic of Moldova 2014/2015", Statistical publication, Chisinau

Role of international organisations

In the area of ECD and child protection, UNICEF plays a leading role in providing financial support and technical assistance across the country. Together with partners at policy level and local community level, including civil society, UNICEF has implemented a number of programmes focused on inclusion of marginalized groups, aimed to reduce the inequalities and provide equal opportunities for all. The contribution of UNICEF at system level is acknowledged in few strategic documents adopted by Moldovan authorities, most notably in the strategy “Education 2020” and Intersectorial Strategy for the Development of Parental Skills and Competences 2015-2021. Development and implementation of the Child Protection Strategy and Education Code have been also strongly supported by UNICEF.

During the period 2007-2015, UNICEF in partnership with the Government and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as well as international development partners has implemented several projects aimed to increase the access and quality of education, most notably the following:

- *Child-friendly schools*, whose objective was to raise school attendance, reduce the school abandonment and improve the educational attainment of pupils by transforming the schools in inclusive and friendly institutions
- *The Global Partnership for Education (GPE)* which contributed to the improvement of quality and inclusiveness level of preschool education
- *Modelling of services for children under three*, which is the object of this evaluation.

There are other international agencies and donors that contributed to increasing the access to quality education, most notably the World Bank, EU, Council of Europe, UNESCO and diplomatic missions.

2. OBJECT OF THE EVALUATION

The **object of this evaluation** is the modelling of services for children under three in ten selected communities in Moldova (hereinafter referred to as “The Project”³⁹) during November 2013 – March 2015. The Project has been implemented by UNICEF Moldova Country Office (CO) in partnership with Moldova Social Investment Fund (MSIF) and National Centre for Early Education and Family Information (CNETIF), based on two separate Project Cooperation Agreements (PCAs).

The Terms of Reference (ToR) (Annex 1) and the PCAs provide an overview of the Project to be evaluated, but they are insufficiently explaining the logic links between UNICEF community level interventions and the higher level results. As there is no Project concept paper containing a Logical Framework⁴⁰ of the overall intervention or a Theory of Change (ToC), the evaluation team has retroactively developed an implicit ToC (see Figure 2 below), based on documentary review of key information sources and Results-Based Management (RBM) methodology. It captures the evaluators’ understanding of how the Project conceptualized the change processes at community and national level that it aimed to influence, starting with bottlenecks towards impact-level contribution. The ToC served as to the main framework for the evaluation and was discussed and validated with Project stakeholders throughout the evaluation.

The ToR, the PCAs and the implicit ToC provide an overall picture of the main features, logic and changes foreseen to be brought about by the evaluated Project, which are presented below.

Goal (impact level)

The Goal of the Project was to contribute to the improvement of learning and development outcomes for children under three in the Republic of Moldova, in line with international human rights standards and the principle of progressive realisation of child rights.

Outcomes

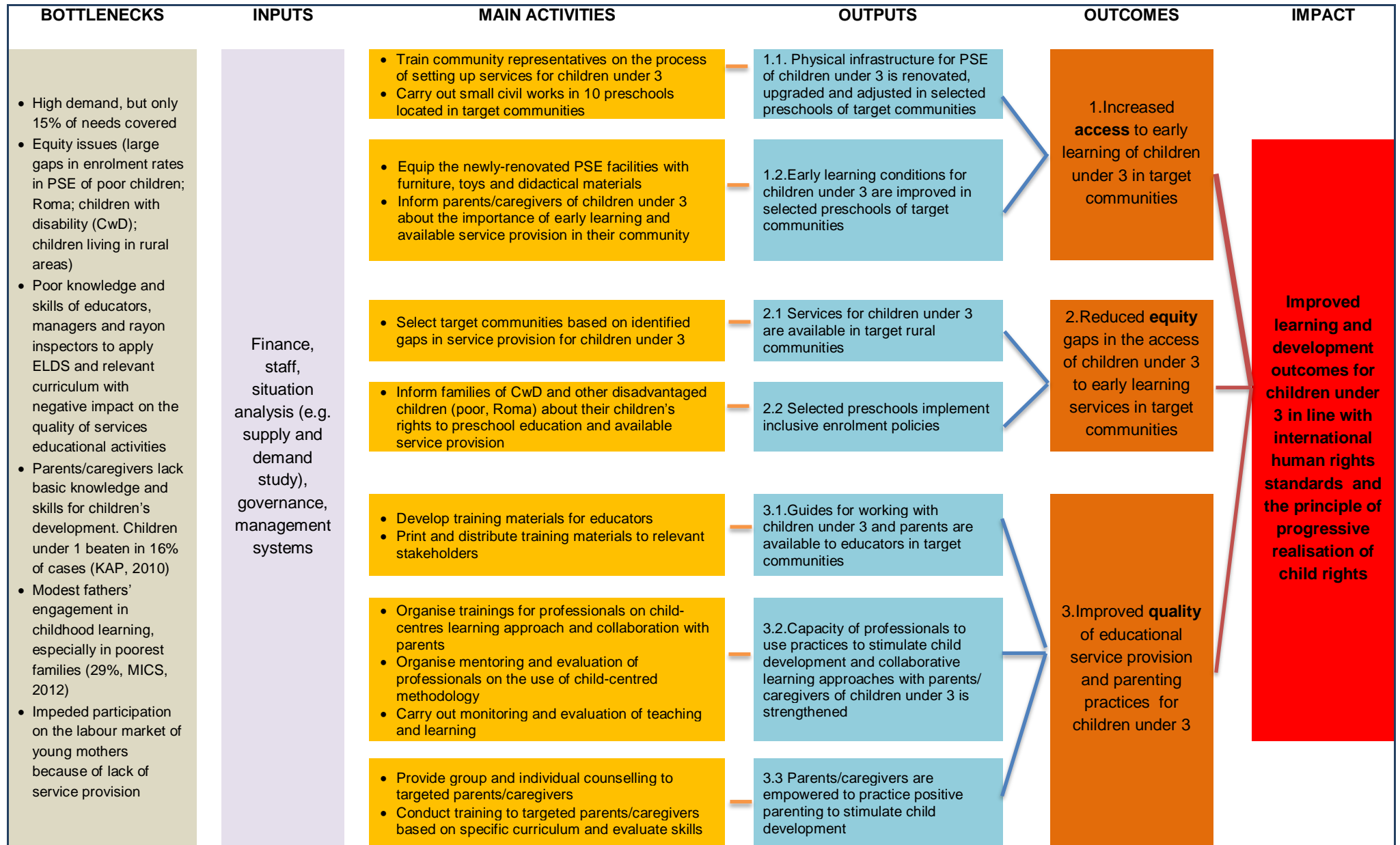
The Project aimed to reach its goal by achieving three outcomes:

1. Increased **access** to early learning of children under three in target communities.
2. Reduced **equity** gaps in the access of children under three to early learning services in target communities.
3. Improved **quality** of educational service provision and parenting practices for children under three.

³⁹ As per ToR terminology.

⁴⁰ The ToR make reference to a ‘Project log-frame’ (pages 4 and 8). Nevertheless, the UNICEF country office confirmed during the kick-off skype discussion conducted on 19 January 2016 that this document is not available.

Figure 2. Theory of Change



Outputs

In line with the intervention logic, ToC (and partially the PCAs) further develops the overarching outcomes into several expected outputs, as follows:

Related to Outcome 1

- 1.1 Physical infrastructure for PSE of children under three is renovated, upgraded and adjusted in selected preschools of target communities
- 1.2 Early learning conditions for children under three are improved in selected preschools of target communities

Related to Outcome 2

- 2.1 Services for children under three are available in target rural communities
- 2.2 Selected preschools implement inclusive enrolment policies

Related to Outcome 3

- 3.1 Guides for working with children under three and parents are available to educators in target communities
- 3.2 Capacity of professionals to use practices to stimulate child development and collaborative learning approaches with parents/caregivers of children under three is strengthened
- 3.3 Parents/ caregivers are empowered to practice positive parenting to stimulate child development

Project Activities

For the achievement of Project expected outputs and outcomes, a rich set of activities have been planned, which included: selection of target communities and preschools; civil works to rehabilitate the selected preschools on the basis of a community re-granting mechanism managed by MSIF; endowment of newly-rehabilitated preschools with toys, furniture and didactical materials; development of pedagogical guides; capacity building and mentoring for professionals; group and individual counselling and training of parents/caregivers of children under three in target communities; evaluation of professionals and parents' skills to stimulate child development; establishment of ten crèche-groups of children under three and provision of services on a pilot basis, etc. A comprehensive list of activities grouped around each output is provided in Figure 2.

Target Groups and Final Beneficiaries

The **Target Groups** of the Project, as mentioned in the PCAs signed with the two national partners, included: 10 preschools located in target communities (one in each community) which were rehabilitated and endowed to be able to host the piloting of new services for children under three; 45 preschool education professionals (educators, managers, rayon inspectors) and mentors from target communities who were trained in child-centred methodologies and collaborative learning; parents/caregivers of beneficiary children under three who received counseling and training for developing positive parenting practices.

The **Final Beneficiaries** (rights-holders) of the Project were planned to be 200 children under three from 10 urban and rural communities.

Strategic Approach

Review of the PCAs indicates that the following strategies were planned to be used in order to implement the Project:

- *Modelling/piloting of new services*: aimed to inform policy making for scaling up at national level, demonstrate how the system could meaningfully evolve to reduce equity gaps and children's rights violations and enhance early learning system management, coordination and planning.
- *Capacity development*: through mentoring and training courses provided to preschool education professionals to increase the quality of service provision for children under three and to parents/caregivers to empower them to use adequate parenting practices.
- *Partnership building*: partnering with renown national organisations for the implementation of Project activities i.e. with MSIF - highly experienced in rehabilitating educational infrastructure, and with CNETIF - experienced in early learning and engagement of parents in the change process for the benefit of small children; partnering with Ministry of Education to ensure transfer of know-how with a view to rolling out the piloted services throughout the country, if proved to be cost-efficient.
- *Advocacy*: through information activities aimed to raise awareness of parents/caregivers on the importance of early childhood education for children under three and the benefits of inclusive education.
- *Participatory approach*: encouragement of representatives of local communities to get actively involved in the setting up and running of new services for children under three (identification of needs and potential, development of proposals for funding, management of grants, monitoring of activities, etc.).
- *Resource leverage*: raising matching funds from target communities for the implementation of civil works.
- *Research-based approach*: baseline research of supply and demand of early and preschool education services (2013), the Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) survey (2010) and international models ensured a pool of evidence and research results able to inform the modelling exercise.

Period of implementation and Financing

The Project had an overall duration of one year and five months (November 2013 – March 2015) and a budget of 2,861,124 MDL⁴¹ (approximately 220,320 USD⁴²). It has been financially supported by UNICEF (94.6%) with matching funds from national partners (5.4%).

Implementation mechanism and partners

As already mentioned, the Project has been implemented by UNICEF Moldova CO in partnership with MSIF and CNETIF, based on separate PCAs.

⁴¹ It does not include the budget spent in 2013 for studies to inform the design of the model, including a study on international models of services for children under three (8,100 USD, financed by UNICEF) and a joint study of UN Women and UNICEF on the demand and supply of early and pre-school education services (financed by UN Women)

⁴² Exchange rates used for calculation: 1 USD = 12.8412 MDL at 01.11.2013 (start date of PCA with MSIF) and 1 USD = 13,4826 MDL at 01.05.2014 (start date of PCA with CNETIF). Source: <http://www.bnm.org/ro/content/ratele-de-schimb>

The **MSIF** was responsible for the rehabilitation and endowment of selected preschools in cooperation with local authorities ('hard' part of the Project), while **CNETIF** was in charge of capacity building of professionals, empowerment of parents/caregivers and ensuring the overall quality of new services for children under three ('soft' part of the Project).

The **Ministry of Education (MoE)** has selected the preschools in 10 communities and got involved in the monitoring of Project activities together with UNICEF Moldova CO. The framework for cooperation was the Rolling Work Plan signed between UNICEF and the Ministry.

At local level, the Project partners were the following:

- **Local public administrations (LPA)** - primarily through the provision of premises for the new services, management of grants for civil works and ensuring own contribution to the funds needed for infrastructure rehabilitation and endowment; the grants were provided by MSIF in accordance with the provision of the PCA and on the basis of Grant Agreements signed with the local public administration in each target community;
- **Preschools** - through the delivery of 10.5-hour daily programme of early learning and development to beneficiary children under three;
- **Preschool educators** - through participation in training activities, implementation of services, mobilization and counselling of parents.

The role of **UNICEF Moldova CO** in the Project was two-fold: to ensure the technical and financial management of the Project, while also bringing in the technical expertise and policy advocacy leverage for the attainment of envisaged outcomes. It has also provided the funding needed to pilot the model for children under three in ten target communities.

3. PURPOSE, OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

The **Purpose** of the evaluation is three-fold: a) to assess the overall end project results in relation to the project objectives; b) to assess the replicability potential of the piloted services for children under three at national level, especially from the perspective of cost-efficiency and sustainability; c) to provide recommendations for future planning and programming of such services, based on documentation of good practices and lessons learnt, both in terms of achieved results and processes which led to these results.

The evaluation is a *summative* evaluation which takes place almost one year after the end of Project. There have been no significant changes in the plans, strategies or results indicators during the Project implementation.

Beyond the purpose of the evaluation, its **specific objectives** are the following (ToR, page 6):

1. To evaluate overall Project achievements against planned results
2. To evaluate the sustainability of the Project and the newly established services and the level of institutionalization of good practice
3. To evaluate the capacity of professionals to provide quality services for children under three
4. To evaluate the potential contribution of the Project to future relevant government policy and/or regulations change in regard to services for children under three
5. To evaluate the contribution and engagement of LPAs, caregivers and private sector in the setting up and maintaining the ongoing, quality functioning of services for children under three
6. To evaluate the impact of the Project in 10 target communities against a control group
7. To measure the satisfaction of parents in regard to the newly established services
8. To evaluate the needs for future support.

The main **beneficiaries of the evaluation** are the Ministry of Education and other relevant line ministries (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Family, Ministry of Finance), local public administrations, UNICEF and relevant donors. The evidence and knowledge generated by the evaluation will be used by the ministries for policy work, notably by informing the development of legislative and normative framework for services for children under three. The good practices and lessons learned identified by the evaluation will be also used by the LPAs for the further development of preschool education services aimed to broaden access to the most marginalized children under three. UNICEF and other international development partners/donors will utilise the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation in their future programming of support for increased early learning and development opportunities for children under three.

The **Scope** of the evaluation is defined by the following elements:

- Project implementation period to be considered: November 2013-March 2015;
- focus on vulnerable parents/caregivers/women and children under three;
- geographic coverage: all supported preschools in the 10 target communities, i.e. Bălți (krg. 48); Coșnița (Dubăsari rayon); Mîndrești (Telenești rayon); Pîrlița (Ungheni rayon); Taraclia de Salcie (Cahul rayon); Baurci (Ceadîrlunga UTAG – Autonomous Territorial Unit of Găgăuzia); Nisporeni (krg. Nr. 1); Călărași (krg. Nr 2); Mingir (Hîncești rayon); Talmază (Ștefan Vodă rayon); and a control group of 10 communities;
- level of change/intervention: local (community) level system change (e.g. service provision, institutionalization of good practices, training curriculum development, mentoring approaches,

enrolment policies changes sparked by the Project).

The main **Units of Analysis** for this evaluation are the following:

- preschool education professionals, as recipients of trainings, mentoring and active participants in the implementation of the Project;
- parents/caregivers (especially the vulnerable ones), as recipients of awareness raising, training and counselling on positive parenting practices as well as mothers' opportunities for reconciling family and professional life;
- children under three, notably vulnerable ones (CwD, Roma, poor, etc.), as final beneficiaries of the new services of early learning and development piloted in the target communities;
- preschools which were rehabilitated and endowed by the Project and where the new services for children under three were piloted;
- LPAs responsible for managing the infrastructure rehabilitation grants in the target communities and crucial stakeholders for ensuring the financial sustainability of preschool education services supported by the Project.

Line ministries, implementation partners, donors and CSOs were also consulted during the Data Review and Collection Phase in relation to their contribution to the Project results or possible future role in the implementation of services for children under three in the Republic of Moldova, but not as main units of analysis.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Evaluation Phases

The evaluation was carried out in three consecutive phases, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 3. Evaluation Phases



I. Inception Phase

Kick-off discussion. In anticipation of the kick-off discussion, a list of needed data, documents and information was sent to UNICEF Moldova CO. The kick-off discussion (skype conference call), attended by the International Consultant (Team Leader), the Director of Institute for Public Policy - IPP (the national company) and UNICEF Moldova CO (Early Childhood Development Officer) took place on 19 January 2016. It was used to understand the client's expectations and ensure that the evaluation team is fully aware of the nature of the desired end-product; get key information about the background of the object of evaluation i.e. modelling of services under three; learn about the key actors and interlocutors for the evaluation; agree procedures in order to have access to all needed documents, information and key informants throughout the evaluation; and agree the timetable for the submission of the Inception Report and the starting of primary data collection in the field. It was also agreed that the Team Leader will be in charge of evaluation framework design, interviews and round table at central level, drafting of reports and overall quality assurance, while the IPP will provide support for the development of data collection instruments and be in charge of local data collection and processing.

Preliminary Desk Review of Secondary Sources of Information. UNICEF Moldova CO has provided a comprehensive set of documents, relevant for this evaluation. The Team Leader has also downloaded from internet other relevant strategies, laws, reports, evaluations, studies, statistical data, etc. and shared them with the national company. The evaluation team undertook a preliminary review of the project documents (PCAs, progress reports, resource utilization reports, field monitoring reports, several Project deliverables), UNICEF's situation analyses, Country Programme Document and its Results Matrix, UNICEF annual reports and available databases (e.g. MICS, TransMonee, Ministry of Economy's database on deprivation indexes). It reviewed the human rights international commitments of Moldova, in particular those deriving from the Concluding Observations of CRC and CEDAW. The review continued during the next phase of the evaluation when more systematic and structured review of key documentation related to the work of UNICEF and its partners in the target communities was done (including documents which were not able to be sent electronically to the evaluation team due to internal country office's procedures of confidentiality).

Evaluability Assessment. An important element of the Inception Phase was to undertake an evaluability assessment of the scope of work planned, based on resources available. Within the scope of the current assignment, the evaluability assessment considered the Evaluation Questions (EQs), intervention logic and the associated indicators (descriptors) to determine the type of information that could be sourced from secondary sources and the areas which require primary data collection. The evaluability assessment indicated that there was a satisfactory level of information to answer most of the EQs, able to be processed in a concise and useful form, and that additional required information could be obtained within the existing resource constraints. A full evaluability assessment has been provided in the Inception Report.

Development of Methods and Tools for Primary Data Collection and Evaluation. Primary data collection methods and tools were designed to cover the identified information needs and ensure the required level of information needed to answer the EQs in relation to the various units of analysis. The data collection methods are presented in Annex 2, while the reasoning for their selection is explained below in the section related to evaluation design. The following primary data collection tools have been developed during the Inception Phase:

- Guides for in-depth interviews, focus groups and round table as well as a structured observation grid for collecting primary data in the target communities (treatment group) and control group (Annex 5);
- Template with Project indicators aimed to map progress along the hierarchy of results (based on the implicit ToC) (completed version presented in the Effectiveness section).

The main evaluation tool which was designed during the Inception Phase was the Evaluation Matrix, grouping the evaluation questions under the evaluation criteria (Annex 3). A Control group has been also constructed (Annex 4).

The Inception Phase ended with the drafting of an **Inception Report**, which included the methodology, a detailed work plan, the full set of the proposed data collection and evaluation tools, control group, proposed roles and responsibilities of parties in the evaluation process as well as an annotated outline of the final report. This Phase lasted from 19 January to 5 February 2016.

II. Data Review and Collection Phase

This phase consisted of an in-depth documentary review to gather secondary quantitative and qualitative data as well as of field work to collect primary data from key stakeholders at national and local levels, based on the data collection tools developed in the Inception Phase and tested during the first week of the Data Review and Collection Phase. The phase also included a 2-week in-country mission of the International Consultant (Team Leader).

During the **in-depth documentary review**, the evaluation team reviewed the remaining documents provided by UNICEF and implementing partners, key laws, policy papers and strategies in the area of education, health and child protection, several rayon development plans, relevant national and local level statistics/databases, independent reports and studies of CSOs, think tanks and international organisations and donors. The documents consulted for this evaluation are presented in Annex 6.

Field data collection was carried out in order to respond to several overarching evaluation questions which required consultation of key stakeholders, deepening the analysis in the target communities and

understanding the operations at the local level. In-depth interviews, focus groups and a round table with a representative number of key stakeholders were carried out in Chisinau and in the communities from both treatment and control groups.

The Data Review and Collection Phase lasted from 8 February to 22 March 2016, including a **debriefing** session with UNICEF on the preliminary findings of the evaluation.

III. Synthesis Phase

Information and facts collected during the first two phases were analysed and integrated in the Draft Evaluation Report, in line with the "UNICEF Evaluation Report Standards" (Evaluation Office, UNICEF NYHQ, September 2004). The analysis was based on the implicit ToC and the Evaluation Matrix developed during the Inception Phase of the evaluation process.

All standard OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, set in the ToR, were endorsed by the evaluation team for the following reasons:

- they are sufficient to provide a sound assessment of the quality, value and significance of the aid intervention, are all necessary and equally important;
- they are fully appropriate for the evaluation purpose, after careful examination of the Project's strategies and ToC;
- they are in line with internationally recognised best practice for a summative evaluation of a project and also consistent with recommended methodologies for final evaluation of external assistance.

The standard evaluation criteria were approached as follows:

- a) **Relevance:** *alignment of the Project to country priorities and needs of targeted stakeholders and beneficiaries.* The assessment of the Project relevance was based on the analysis of the national and local context and the challenges of the ECD and preschool education reforms to advance the realisation of children's rights. The relevance was analysed in relation to country policies, strategies and priorities, equity agenda, international human rights commitments of Moldova and, most notably, in relation to the needs and priorities of vulnerable children and other key stakeholders (preschool education professionals, parents/caregivers, LPAs).
- b) **Effectiveness:** *the extent to which the Project attained planned objectives and results.* Using the ToC/logic model, the evaluation analysed to what extent the results obtained following the implementation of the Project have contributed to the attainment of the planned objectives from the perspective of children's access to quality early learning and development services, capacity building of preschool education professionals to deliver responsive, high quality services and empowerment of parents/caregivers to use positive parenting practices. Using evidence collected, the report explains the factors that contributed or hampered the achievement of results and additional, unplanned significant contribution towards improvement of service provision for children under three in target communities. Evaluation of effectiveness paid special attention to the demonstration of/collecting strong evidence on the causal link between UNICEF intervention and the observed changes in the existing operating space of Moldova.
- c) **Efficiency:** *resource allocations for modelling of services relative to the results generated, value for money, management and timeliness of interventions.* The report analyses how well UNICEF

Moldova CO organized itself in delivering its work with regard to managerial, monitoring and budget efficiency of the two intervention areas i.e. 'hard' component (rehabilitation works, endowment) and 'soft' component (capacity building) at community level. Analysis of efficiency was based on the assessment of outputs in relation to Project inputs, costs and planned timelines. The report also incorporates discussion of issues related to the assessment of cost-effectiveness of services piloted by the Project, using as far as possible benchmarking with similar services at national level. Coherence with other relevant UN/donor interventions for children under three and coordination among key stakeholders in the design and implementation of the Project as well as UNICEF comparative advantage were reviewed as well.

- d) Impact:** *positive and negative changes produced by the Project interventions on the life of children and women in the target communities, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended.* The impact evaluation practice defines two types of impact evaluation: theory-based and counterfactual. The ToR request the use of a control group, hence a counterfactual, quantifiable approach to compare the effects of the Project in the targeted municipalities ('treatment' group) compared to those not supported by the Project ('control' group). The evaluation identified the quantitative effect of the Project upon the access of children under three to quality services and employment status of their mothers, but the assessment of the Project impact on children in terms of learning and development outcomes was primarily be done from a qualitative perspective due to limitations detailed in section 4.4 below. The evaluation also assessed the potential of the Project to support policy and regulatory framework changes for children under three.
- e) Sustainability:** *measurement of whether the benefits of the Project are likely to continue beyond the intervention cycle.* The evaluation assessed to what extent the outcomes and benefits generated by the Project continued to exist without or with a lower level of external support. It was essential to assess the extent to which prerequisites for sustainability have been put in place and the concrete measures undertaken to date to ensure sustainability of results. Sustainability was analysed from various perspectives: legal/policy, institutional, capacity building, financial. The report highlights the factors that facilitated or hindered the sustainability of the results for children and their families.

The additional criteria i.e. human rights/gender, coverage, coordination and coherence specified in the ToR have been integrated into the main evaluation criteria above, as presented in the Inception Report.

The Synthesis Phase took place from 23 March until 20 May 2016. IPP, which was in charge of collecting and processing data at local level, has provided a comprehensive set of syntheses and primary data to UNICEF Moldova CO on 8 April 2016. The first version of the Draft Evaluation Report, prepared by the Team Leader, was released on 12 April 2016. The feedback received from UNICEF was incorporated in the second Draft Evaluation Report which was disseminated to key stakeholders. The findings, conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation were validated by national stakeholders during a round table which took place on 16 August 2016. The feedback received from national stakeholders and the external UNICEF reviewer was used to draft the Final Evaluation Report.

4.2 Evaluation Design

The design of the evaluation was based on a careful selection of data sources, data collection methods and data analysis methods, as detailed below.

Data sources

For each Evaluation Question (EQ) in the Evaluation Matrix, specific data sources were identified and included in the Evaluation Matrix (see Annex 3, last column). Their selection was based on the following considerations:

- They were relevant for informing the analysis of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability;
- Used in a combined manner, they were able to increase the accuracy of information and mitigate the information gaps and limitations (see also Table 3 on evaluation limitations and mitigation approaches);
- They were appropriate for embedding a diversity of perspectives in the analysis: planners, implementers and final beneficiaries; policy makers at central, rayon and municipality level; external evaluators and reviewers; international development partners; civil society.

Data collection methods

The methodology model designed for this evaluation aimed to utilize the best mix of data gathering tools to yield the most reliable and valid answers to the EQs and generate maximum learning within the limits of resources and availability of data. In order to serve its purpose, the evaluation applied a **mixed-method approach**⁴³, including: stakeholder mapping; mapping of situation and contextual analyses; in-depth documentary review and structured desk analysis of modelling design, implementation approaches, documenting of results and processes; structured desk analysis of policy documents and legislative frameworks; implementation strategies; analysis and testing of the implicit ToC for the piloting of services; analysis of results from M&E systems and data at national and community level; aggregation and analysis of data collected via the structured observation grid; contribution analysis to determine factors which promoted or impeded the progress against intended results and attribution analysis to the extent possible; systems analysis of management, monitoring, quality control and assurance strategies; mapping of risks analyses and mitigation measures; financial analysis; analysis of sustainability strategies and systemic barriers to sustainability; in-depth interviews, focus groups and round table; structured observation during site visits to communities.

Specific data collection methods have been assigned to each EQ in the Evaluation Matrix. These methods were selected because of the following reasons:

- They were appropriate for the Project strategy and intervention-level inquiry in communities.
- They were feasible and sensible, following the preliminary data review in the Inception Phase.
- They formed a relatively effective means of triangulation if used in a combined manner.
- Use of interviews, focus groups and round table in the field increased the breath of perspectives and data that could be secured; relying only on secondary data would have been insufficient; thus the field study was essential to ensure a degree of validity, as follows:
 - in-depth interviews with key informants at national and local level were used to collect qualitative data and capture various perspectives on the way the Project addressed the complexity of issues in the early learning and development of children under three, how the

⁴³ It combines various methods as a way to overcome limitations and highlight strengths - see Stern et al (2012), "Broadening the range of designs and methods for impact evaluations", DFID, Working Paper 38.

Project worked and how could have worked better for informing policy-making and reforms in ECD;

- the evaluation had to be informed by feedback from as many key stakeholders as possible, but it was not feasible to conduct individual interviews with all key informants given the resource constraints. Therefore, the evaluation used focus groups with preschool education professionals and parents/caregivers, and round table with CSOs;
 - the communities from Moldova, especially the rural ones, are not significantly different to justify focus groups in each of the 10 target communities and in those forming the control group; based on research practice, there is a data saturation after carrying out 6 interviews with the same category of stakeholders, and the information collected above this number would require unnecessary financial and human resources effort (processing, stenography, etc.); therefore the number of interviews were kept to a meaningful level;
 - contact with final beneficiaries, as rights holders, i.e. children under three, would have been crucial for the evaluation; however, given their small age, no interviews were possible. Instead, the evaluation used focus groups with parents/caregivers and professionals to collect vital impressions on the relevance, accessibility, quality and impact of provided services on beneficiary children. Direct observation was also used during the site visits to target communities.
- Disaggregated data on results obtained by the preschools in target communities were needed to inform the assessment of effectiveness; given significant data gaps, disaggregated data were collected via a structured observation grid filled in for each kindergarten considered by the evaluation.
 - In order to carry out a counterfactual analysis, as implied by the ToR, the evaluation team constructed a 'control group' of ten communities, based on the quasi-experimental method of 'simple difference'⁴⁴. That allowed a comparison with the target communities (forming the 'treatment group') in terms of effects of the Project on early learning environment and development of children under three (as perceived by parents/caregivers and professionals). The criteria used for the selection of communities in the control group are presented in Annex 4.

Data analysis

The evaluation was designed to assess the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of the Project based on the concept papers, implicit ToC, PCAs with implementing partners and indicators that the Project used for monitoring performance and attainment of estimated results.

The ToR specify 19 EQs linked to the five evaluation criteria mentioned above and 7 EQs linked to additional criteria on human rights/gender; coverage of the Project activities; coordination among different stakeholders; and coherence with UN and other donors' policies for supporting the development of services for children under three. Based on this, a core analytical framework was drawn up in the Inception Phase in the form of an Evaluation Matrix (Annex 3), against which data were gathered and analysed. All EQs – *formulated as in the ToR or reformulated and regrouped, streamlined and allocated to the appropriate evaluation criteria on the basis of the logic model reflected by the implicit ToC* - have been assigned to a specific evaluation criterion (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and

⁴⁴ It measures the difference between program participants and non-participants after the program is completed. The control group is made of individuals who did not participate in the program, but for whom data were collected after the program. Non-participants are identical to participants except for Project participation and were equally likely to enter the program before it started. Required data: after data for program participants and non-participants. Source:

<https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/documents/Experimental%20Methodology%20Table.pdf>

sustainability). The EQs under the four additional criteria have been absorbed into the five criteria mentioned above to ensure a more coherent and consolidated response. The Evaluation Matrix comprised additional evaluation areas apart from those mentioned in the ToR, such as the relevance of the Project for the international commitments of the country, the unplanned effects of the Project, cost-effectiveness of the intervention, factors hindering or supporting the sustainability of results. As a result, 17 EQs have been introduced in the Evaluation Matrix. For each EQ, one or several judgement criteria have been included as well as related quantitative and qualitative indicators. Data sources and methods of data collection have been also specified in the Matrix. The indicators and methods were based on initial study conducted during the Inception Phase, experience from similar evaluations and a review of available data. Methods were set out per question, and the forms of triangulation between them made clear. An overview of the grouping of questions around the main evaluation criteria was presented in the Inception Report. The questions in the Evaluation Matrix have been to the extent possible framed based on the units of analysis, indicating their relative importance and the relative emphasis on the different target groups and beneficiaries.

Analysis took place against the analytical framework in the following ways: across the analytical fields, which are drawn from the Evaluation Matrix; common trends, contradictions and differences were sought out and explored; b) the different pathways of contribution at different levels of results were tracked, identified and triangulated; explanatory factors related to the operating space, internal environment, design of the Project approach and implementation of related interventions at community level were assessed; gaps in information available were identified and reported.

Validity and reliability of analysis was ensured through triangulation, complementarity and interrogation⁴⁵. Impartiality and lack of bias were safeguarded by the evaluation methodology which relied on a cross-section of information sources and used a blended methodological approach (quantitative, qualitative and participatory) to ensure triangulation of information through a variety of means.

The design of the evaluation methodology combined a **Results-Based Management** with a **Human Rights-Based Approach** (HRBA) to programming and evaluation i.e. achievement of planned results through morally-acceptable processes to realise human rights, in particular children's rights. The HRBA applied by the evaluation was guided by five core principles: normativity, participation, non-discrimination, accountability and transparency, and by the Common Understanding on HRBA to Development Cooperation and Programming (United Nations Development Group, 2003):

- All programmes of development cooperation, policies and technical assistance should further the realization of human rights as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments.
- Human rights standards contained in, and principles derived from, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments guide all development cooperation and programming in all sectors and in all phases of the programming process.
- Development cooperation contributes to the development of the capacities of 'duty bearers' to meet their obligations and/or of 'rights-holders' to claim their rights.

⁴⁵ Triangulation to confirm and corroborate results reached by different methods, complementarity to explain and understand findings obtained by one method by applying second and interrogation where diverging results emerge from the application of different methods.

This evaluation identified the main “**rights holders**” of the Project the children under three in the targeted communities, particularly those who are at most risk and children (CwD and special education needs, Roma children, poor children, children living in rural areas).

Attention was given to the evaluation of **gender equality and mainstreaming** issues reflected by the Project, in line with Moldova’s international commitments, most notably CEDAW and UNICEF Gender Policy (2010)⁴⁶ which states that UNICEF aims to work with partners to pursue gender equality and the equal rights of girls and boys “to contribute to poverty reduction and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals through results-oriented, effective and coordinated action that achieves the protection, survival and development of girls and boys on an equal basis.”

The Evaluation assessed the extent to which the achieved Project results contributed to the progressive realisation of children’s rights, equity and addressing gender equality. In this respect, the Evaluation Matrix included specific evaluation questions, as follows:

- *Has the Project addressed the underlying causes of exclusion and responded to the needs of children under three, especially of the most vulnerable children, from the perspective of:*
 - *Equity*
 - *Human rights principles (non-discrimination, participation, etc.)*
 - *HRBA and gender mainstreaming*
- *What was the achievement level of planned results (quantitative and qualitative) for final beneficiaries (children, in particular vulnerable ones) and target groups (parents/caregivers, professionals, service providers)*
- *What were the effects of the Project on the employment status of mothers of children under three in the target communities?*

The evaluation used to the extent possible disaggregated data by gender and vulnerability profile.

Ethical aspects

During data collection, attention was paid to ensuring that the evaluation process was ethical and that participants in the process could openly express their opinions, protecting the confidentiality of their answers. Overall, the UNEG Code of Conduct for Evaluation in the UN System (March, 2008) was strictly respected, notably independence of judgement, impartiality, honesty and integrity, accountability, respect and protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects and communities, confidentiality, avoidance of risks, harm to and burdens on those participating in the evaluation, accuracy, completeness and reliability of report, transparency. The evaluators were sensitive to beliefs, manners and customs and acted with integrity and honesty in their relationships with all stakeholders, ensured that their contacts with individuals were characterized by respect, protect the anonymity and confidentiality of individual information.

The process of recruiting stakeholders from different institutional levels followed a standard procedure in order to ensure an informed consent to participate in the evaluation (letter of introduction from UNICEF presenting the evaluation process, protection of privacy and information confidentiality, followed up by

⁴⁶ UNICEF, “Working for an Equal Future. UNICEF Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Girls and Women”, New York, May 2010

written/verbal communication regarding the interview/focus group/round table details). Participation in the evaluation was voluntary and opinions were presented in the report in an anonymous manner.

Selection of parents/caregivers (part of the target group, unit of analysis) for the focus groups was done in cooperation with the service providers (preschools) in the visited communities, based on specific sampling criteria⁴⁷. Parents/caregivers were informed about the scope of the focus group and its main discussion topics. Parents' consent to participate was secured. Parents of vulnerable children were approached in a culturally-sensitive manner, based on UNEG Ethical Guidelines⁴⁸. They were offered the opportunity to participate in the focus groups or to be interviewed individually.

Given the small age of the children (final beneficiaries and rights-holders), they were not engaged in the data collection process.

UNEG Norms and Standards, including Guidance on **Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluation**⁴⁹, were fully applied throughout the evaluation.

4.3 Stakeholders' participation in evaluation

Involvement of stakeholders in the evaluation was of utmost importance for the collection of vital data and critical insights, but also for validating findings and conclusions as well as checking the feasibility of recommendations while ensuring buy-in.

In gathering data and views from stakeholders, the evaluation considered a cross-section of stakeholders with potentially diverse views to ensure that the evaluation findings are as impartial and representative as possible (see Annexes 2 and 7). The evaluation was highly participative. In total, **a number of 213 people have been involved during the evaluation**, representing key stakeholders of the Project: parents/caregivers, professionals, authorities at central, rayon and local levels, service providers (kindergartens), UNICEF and international development partners, civil society organisations.

The evaluation was so designed to ensure the involvement of stakeholders at three levels: **information, participation and consultation**, depending on the nature of each stakeholder and engagement in the implementation of the Project. Interviews, focus groups and round table were used for:

- 1) **Informing the evaluation:** primary data collection to cover gaps and add multiple informant perspectives;
- 2) **Enabling participation of stakeholders in the evaluation:** collection of qualitative, critical insights from stakeholders; direct participation of stakeholders in the testing of the reconstructed ToC and results indicators as well as in the analysis and evaluation of the results and impact, also via self-evaluation;
- 3) **Engaging stakeholders in consultation on future priorities and reforms:** checking the perceived priorities for the continuation of the reforms in improving the access to quality ECE of children under three as well as the role each of them could play in the future. In this respect,

⁴⁷ For the treatment group, kindergartens provided lists with parents and IPP selected the 7th parent from each list to avoid bias. In the case of control group, the following criteria were used: number of children, employment status, ethnicity, disability, migrant status.

⁴⁸ UNEG (2008), "Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation", <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/102>

⁴⁹ UNEG (2014), "Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluations", <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/980>

specific questions have been included in the Interview Guides (Annex 5) to capture the various perspectives of a large range of stakeholders.

This was very useful for informing the recommendations of the evaluation based on an open and participatory process started during the field data collection and continued on the occasion of the **round table** when draft findings, conclusions and recommendations were presented, discussed and validated by the national stakeholders. They have praised the solid methodology used for the evaluation, its comprehensive nature and the consistent child-focussed assessment. They have also welcome all recommendations formulated by the evaluation team. In addition, the stakeholders highlighted the need to further work on the optimization of the preschool education network for a better use of existing space in compliance with the demand for services; carry out a feasibility study to identify the best options for infrastructure rehabilitation in case the model is rolled out nationally; introduce the function of 'parental educator in the school; strengthen the early childhood detection and intervention services for identification of small CwD or with special educational needs and enrol them in ECE; involve more efficiently the health and social protection line ministries (given the multidimensional nature of early childhood education and development), thus avoiding the exclusive tasking of the Ministry of Education. All these aspects have been embedded in the Final Evaluation Report.

4.4 Evaluation Limitations

The ToR do not specify any limitations for this evaluation. The evaluation team has nevertheless identified possible limitations (constraints), which are presented in Table 3 together with corresponding mitigation approaches.

Table 3. Limitations to the Evaluation and Mitigation Approaches

Potential Limitations/Constraints	Mitigation approaches
Insufficient data disaggregation (by gender, vulnerability profile, etc.). No targets for several indicators in the project design and reporting documents, in particular for the soft part of the Project – these data gaps might have hindered the robustness of assessment, in particular the Project relevance for vulnerable children and the measurement of achievements against planned outcomes and outputs. They might have also limited the full application of contribution analysis at the higher levels of results.	Together with UNICEF, CNETIF and other relevant stakeholders at community level as well as based on primary data collection methods (structured observation grid, interviews, focus groups), the evaluation team reconstructed the targets to the extent possible and gathered some missing disaggregated data. In case of persistent information gaps, a more qualitative appraisal was used, applying contribution analysis at different levels, rather than a full inventory and assessment of inputs, respectively results. The use of proxy indicators in cases of simply unavailable data was also done in parallel with the adoption of a mixed-method approach (described in section 4.2) to ensure triangulation through the use of multiple qualitative and quantitative sources and cross-checking those on an on-going basis. In the synthesis phase, assumptions of pathways to results based on the ToC were assessed.
Data paucity concerning the costing of alternative services for children under three and benchmarking – it might impede a	UNICEF Moldova CO put at the disposal of the evaluation team the study on costing conducted

Potential Limitations/Constraints	Mitigation approaches
fully-fledged cost-effectiveness analysis of piloted services	by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2016). The study is useful for benchmarking only. Constructing the cost/child in the target communities would have required resources that this evaluation did not have. The evaluation team has nevertheless analysed other key elements of Project cost-effectiveness, related to the use of human resources, structure and level of various budget categories compared to market rates and good practices, cost-sharing mechanism, etc. (see Efficiency section). Where data were simply unavailable, the analysis was primarily done from a qualitative perspective, as reflected in the judgement criteria of EQ 9 (Evaluation Matrix, Annex 3).
<p>Resource constraints (financial, time) to assess the quantitative learning and development outcomes of children under three as a result of newly-developed capacity of parents/caregivers and professionals to use 'positive practices to stimulate the social-affective, cognitive and motor development of the child' - According to international practice, the assessment of an intervention impact upon the social, emotional, cognitive and motor development of a child is done by licensed experts in the use of standardized and scientifically validated instruments with specific psychometric properties. The assessment is done both pre and post-intervention; carrying it out only post-intervention cannot highlight (isolate) the maturational effect and impedes an analysis of variance needed to validate the research hypotheses. The assessment is usually costly (development/ testing/validation or procurement of instruments, licensing or use of licensed experts, etc.) and requires at least one year for being conducted. The evaluation of the Project does not meet these prerequisites, which is indirectly acknowledged in the ToR which indicate a methodology relying exclusively on interviews and focus groups.</p>	Given these resource constraints, the impact of the Project on child development and learning outcomes was primarily evaluated from a qualitative point of view, based on the assessment of CNETIF mentors, perceptions of professionals and parent/caregivers as well as expert opinion of selected key informants.
Unavailability of vulnerable parents/caregivers	In cases when vulnerable parents/caregivers were not able to attend the focus group in Chisinau due to sensitivity issues or impossibility to leave the children unattended at home, the methodology included, as back up (but also for gathering more insights), in-depth interviews with such parents/ caregivers during the site visits to communities. Questions were formulated as to avoid any discomfort and sensitivity. The evaluators created an open, trustful atmosphere to facilitate open sharing of views and opinions in full confidentiality.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

5.1 Relevance

Evaluation of relevance was based on the following evaluation questions:

To what extent was the Project relevant for the national policies, strategies and priorities as well as for international commitments of Moldova?

Has the Project addressed the underlying causes of exclusion and responded to the needs of children under three, especially of the most vulnerable children, from the perspective of equity, human rights principles (non-discrimination, participation, etc.), HRBA & gender mainstreaming?

To what extent was the Project relevant to the needs of other key stakeholders, i.e. preschool education professionals, LPA and parents/caregivers?

Alignment with country's priorities, strategies and international commitments

The evaluation has found evidence through desk research and consultation with key informants that **there is alignment of Project design and its objectives with the needs and priorities of Moldova in the area of early childhood development and early learning.** Preschool education is acknowledged by decision-makers as essential for the multilateral development of children under three and as such integrated in the Education Code (articles 23 and 24).

The Project is in line with the country strategies and policy papers in the area of preschool education, child protection and healthcare. The *Strategy for the development of education 2014-2020* "Education 2020" includes among its specific objectives the development of child-focused early education (objective 2.1) through curriculum modernization in line with development standards applicable to children until the age of seven, increased accountability of the teaching staff for an efficient and correct implementation of these standards and monitoring of the development level of children under seven. Another specific objective refers to the parental education with a view to improving the parenting skills and practices. The Project has addressed these needs by developing guides for educators working with children under three in the target communities, based on the existing development standards, followed by modular training courses and mentoring activities. It has also monitored the development level of children and worked with parents and caregivers to promote and develop positive parenting skills.

The *Child Protection Strategy 2014-2020 and its Action Plan* point to the fact that there are no support services (crèches) for children under three and mothers are thus unable to go to work; the documents also discuss the insufficient participation of fathers in child education and the perpetuation of traditional family roles whereby women bear the full responsibility for household keeping. The Project has been fully in line with the goals and targets of the Strategy i.e. development and promotion of support services for at least 33% children aged 1-3 to facilitate the return on the labour market of women, as well as with several specific measures embedded in the Action Plan, i.e. development of crèches for children under three to, implementation of the National Programme for the development of preschool infrastructure, in particular in

rural areas, and implementation of programmes aimed to develop parenting skills (actions 2.1.11, 3.2.6 and 3.2.7).

There is also evidence that the Project has been consistent with the provisions of the *National Health Policy (2007)* which calls for information and counselling programmes for parents with small children via preschool education system (measure 43) and adequate nutrition of these children at home and in the crèche or kindergartens (measures 44 and 84). In this respect, the Project provided information as well as individual and group counselling to parents/caregivers of children attending the pilot crèche-groups in order to increase awareness and develop parenting skills, including nutrition and supervision of the health status of their children.

The Project is consistent with the international commitments and human rights standards ratified by Moldova. By setting up and running crèche-groups in 10 target communities, the Project facilitated the return on the labour market of 108 women, thus addressing the shortcomings identified by the Third Millennium Development Goals Report (2013)⁵⁰ in relation to *MDG 3 Promote gender equality and empower women*, according to which the “lack or insufficiency of places in preschool institutions affects the employment of women with children of preschool age”. The Project has also addressed the need for parental education programmes in line with the *Concluding Observations of the CRC Committee*, point 45b⁵¹, but had no achievements in terms of increasing access to early education of Roma children and CwD (points 25, 50, 61b), as detailed below.

The Project is in line with article 138 of the *EU-Moldova Association Agreement* referring to the need for increasing children’s access to education and strengthen the capacity of parents and carers to ensure child development. It is also consistent with current European strategies, most notably the *Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020)* which calls for “increasing participation in early childhood education as a foundation for later educational success”.⁵² It is relevant for the priorities of *UNICEF Moldova*, as addressed in the Country Programme 2013-2017 (outcome 1).

The Project remained relevant in time, as demonstrated by the strategies and policy documents developed during its lifetime (e.g. Strategy for the Health, Development and Welfare of Children and Adolescents, Action Plan for the implementation of Child Protection Strategy, Inter-sectorial Strategy concerning the development of parental abilities and competencies) as well as by the updated local strategic plans of the communities targeted by the Project and which call for further development of services for children under three. At the same time, there is a persistently high parents’ demand for the services piloted by the Project. Based on the estimations made by the rayon Education Directorates during the field phase, crèche-groups are needed to be set up in an additional number of 121 communities in the respective rayons, apart from the 10 communities where the Project intervened.

Relevance to needs of children under three and underlying causes of social exclusion

The stakeholders consulted for the purpose of evaluation – ministries, local authorities, professionals, parents/caregivers, CSOs - have all confirmed the great need for early education and care services for

⁵⁰ Government of the Republic of Moldova (2013), “The Third Millennium Development Goals Report. Republic of Moldova”, Chisinau, page 44

⁵¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009), “Concluding observations: Republic of Moldova”, Fiftieth session, CRC/C/MDA/CO/3

⁵² Council of the European Union (2009), “Council Conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020)”, Brussels

children under three and were thus praising UNICEF for its commendable initiative to pilot such services in the country. The evaluation was informed that investment done in Moldovan preschool institutions over the last ten years by the Government, local authorities and especially by development partners has exclusively targeted children aged three to six/seven. **The only exception was this Project which addressed the needs of children under three, highlighting the strategic value added which was contributed by UNICEF Moldova to the national efforts of enhancing the participation of young children in ECE.** The importance of targeting this age group stems from evidence provided by developmental and neuroscience research that early childhood, the period from 0 to 3 years, is the most critical developmental phase in life. Adverse childhood experiences including deprivation, abuse, neglect and malnutrition can have a lifelong impact on development, mental and physical health, and productivity.⁵³ The relevance of the Project for the needs of children under three is also illustrated by the approach used by UNICEF in linking education to development, the aim being to stimulate the socio-affective, cognitive and motor development of the child as well as health care and nutrition in ways that are child-centred and reflect the rights of the child. This approach is in line with the General Comment no.7 (2006) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child “Implementing child rights in early childhood”.

UNICEF Moldova’s decision to invest in developing services for children under three, as rights-holders, has been informed by the results of a study carried out in 2013, according to which the demand for early education services for this age category was 46% of the number of non-enrolled children (approximately 44, 800 children)⁵⁴. Out of six rayons in the country with an attendance rate below the national average, the Project worked in four of them⁵⁵. Data indicate that **the Project has successfully reached children under three living in rural areas (Table 4) where the enrolment rate is two times less compared to the one in urban areas (see Table 2) and where the average yearly expenditures per child under three enrolled in preschool education is less than half compared to urban areas.**⁵⁶

Table 4. Beneficiary children by gender, residence and vulnerability (number and %)

Total	Gender	Area of residence	Vulnerable children					
			Poor ⁵⁷	Left behind	Single-parent	3 and more children	CwD/SEN	Roma children ⁵⁸
246	116 girls (47%)	Urban 84 (34%)	16 (7%)	14 (6%)	13 (5%)	9 (4%)	-	-
	130 boys (53%)	Rural 162 (66%)						

Source: Project data, 2014, provided by CNETIF

⁵³ Engle, P. (2011), “Early child development: Why should we invest in the health and development of young children?” in *Early Child Development: What Parliamentarians Need to Know and Do*, UNICEF; Shonkoff, J., Boyce, W. T., and McEwen, B. S. (2009), “Neuroscience, Molecular Biology, and the Childhood Roots of Disparities: Building a New Framework for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention. Summary of Essential Findings”, in *JAMA*, 3 June 2009, Vol. 301, No. 21, pp. 2252–2259.

⁵⁴ UN Women, UNICEF (2013), “The Demand and Supply of Early and Pre-School Education Services from the perspective of women’s employability (the case of the Republic of Moldova), Chisinau

⁵⁵ Telenesti, Calarasi, Nisporeni, UTA.

⁵⁶ In case of the urban area, the average yearly expenditures per one child enrolled in nurseries amounted to MDL 18.6 thousand between 2008 – 2012, while, at rural level, the same indicator was less than half – 53% (MDL 8.7 thousand). Source: PricewaterhouseCoopers (2016), “Assessment of the preschool education system and definition of the costing methodology for childcare and education services in the Republic of Moldova” (draft February 2016), Chisinau

⁵⁷ Poverty status based on assessment of preschool principals.

⁵⁸ At the time of site visits in March 2016 (after the Project ended), there were 3 Roma children enrolled in the crèche-groups in two communities; however, 2 of them have self-identified as Moldovans.

The Project also managed to reach a number of 52 vulnerable children, representing 21% of beneficiary children. There are nevertheless some equity issues which appear to have been insufficiently addressed. The proportion of poor beneficiary children seems to be rather low considering the fact that most of the poor children in Moldova live in rural areas.⁵⁹ There are no CwD/SEN among the final beneficiaries, despite the fact that there were around 60 children⁶⁰ under three living in the target communities (2015) and specific indicators on the enrolment of this category of children in the crèche-groups supported by the Project were figuring in both agreements signed by UNICEF with MSIF and CNETIF. The latter has also included mitigation measures to tackle the possible risks of "Resistance to change towards social inclusion of children with special needs on behalf of professionals and care-givers" and "Discriminatory social and cultural norms do not encourage families with CwD to support and engage in young children's development at home" (PCA with CNETIF, page 6). Another category of vulnerable children which the Project failed to address is Roma children although 4 out of the 10 target communities are Roma densely-populated communities⁶¹ and there are around 115 Roma children under three⁶² (2015) living there. The Effectiveness section provides a full analysis of factors which impeded a more inclusive approach towards the enrolment of these vulnerable groups.

Relevance to the needs of professionals, parents/caregivers and local communities

The Project responded to the need for teacher training in order to build the capacity of educators (key duty-bearers) to work with children under three and apply child-centred teaching methodologies. As confirmed by the Ministry of Education and principals of kindergartens, there was no available in-service training opportunities for the education staff working with this age group and their families, on the background of an obsolete curriculum. To cover this gap, the Project developed two Guides based on national standards for early learning and development of the child from birth to 7 and professional standards. It also organised training courses for educators, principals and early education staff within the rayon Education Directorates. In addition, educators benefited of mentoring at their workplace provided by CNETIF and M&E of the quality of early education and care on a regular basis. According to the feedback received from the focus group with educators and interviews with professionals, the guides, trainings and mentoring were very useful and relevant for their needs. Specific training on inclusive education and diversity would have been needed in case CwD/SEN and Roma children were enrolled in the crèche-groups set up in the target communities. This has not been the case, as discussed above.

The Project addressed an important challenge of the preschool education in Moldova i.e. lack of basic knowledge and skills of parents/caregivers (notably grandparents taking care of children left behind by migrant parents) to cope with parental duties and child developmental needs, as informed by the KAP survey (2010) and UN Women/UNICEF study (2013). The Project addressed this challenge by raising the awareness of parents/caregivers, as duty-bearers, on the importance of early learning and by providing individual and group counselling to develop positive child rearing practices and skills. In this manner, parents/caregivers were empowered to contribute, as active partners, to the

⁵⁹ Around 85% of all poor children in Moldova live in rural areas according to the Ministry of Economy (2012), "Poverty Report of the Republic of Moldova 2010-2011", Chisinau.

⁶⁰ Data compiled by IPP based on figures provided by LPAs in target communities via the structured observation grid. The actual number is higher since CwD go usually unidentified by the education, health and social protection systems, as demonstrated by international evidence.

⁶¹ Talmaza, Calarasi, Balti and Mingir. Source: UNDP (2013), "Report on the Mapping of Roma densely-populated communities in the Republic of Moldova", Chisinau

⁶² Data compiled by IPP based on figures provided by the LPAs of target communities via the structured observation grid. The actual number is much higher since many Roma parents tend to self-identify themselves as Moldovans.

stimulation of socio-affective, cognitive and motor development of their children while also being more aware of health and nutrition requirements. This is an important aspect of the HRBA in the programming and implementation of UN support which has been well addressed by the Project. **The Project has also responded to the need of mothers to return on the labour market** (see the Impact section).

From the perspective of local community, the Project was in line with the need to expand the preschool facilities (physical space, furniture, equipment, didactical materials, human resources) and thus the coverage of ECE, by supporting the education authorities to partner with the municipalities, kindergartens, parents and, in some cases, with the private sector. It also addressed the need for community mobilisation and strengthened capacity of local stakeholders to identify and prioritise needs, develop project proposals, fund raise and monitor the implementation of the project, in this case - the rehabilitation works in the kindergartens hosting the crèche-groups. As already mentioned, the Project had an explicit focus on rural communities (7 of 10 target communities) with an enrolment rate much lower than the urban areas and are the most deprived of quality preschool infrastructure and teachers.

Relevance to human rights, equity and gender mainstreaming agenda

The Project has been guided by the Human Rights-Based Approach to programming. The overarching human rights principles of *non-discrimination, equality, rule of law* and use of *maximum available resources* were implicit in the implementation and monitoring of the Project. There have been some *equity issues* raised by the limited inclusiveness of the enrolment policy of kindergartens, as mentioned above. The *participation principle* was well represented at the level of professionals and education authorities, in their capacity of duty-bearers, by engaging them in various Project activities (in monitoring, trainings, delivery of ECE, assessment of impact upon development of children). Participation of parents in the stimulation of child development and ECE quality monitoring was strongly encouraged through specific awareness raising and training actions. Parents were also involved in the needs assessment process in their community and in the design of the local projects (infrastructure rehabilitation) submitted for UNICEF financing via MSIF. The *empowerment principle* worked well at the level of duty-bearers, notably professionals working in ECE and parents/caregivers to practice positive parenting. Given its profound UNCRC-oriented nature, the *budget of the Project was fully rights-based*.

Although gender equality was not an explicit strategy pursued by the Project, there was a rather good gender balance among the beneficiary children. The PCAs signed with the two implementing partners do not include any reference to gender issues. The formulation of target groups, final beneficiaries and indicators is gender-blind. Progress reports do not report gender disaggregated data nor do they contain specific discussion on any possible gender issues raised during the implementation of the Project. Following the request of the evaluation team, CNETIF has kindly compiled gender disaggregated information. According to data made available to the evaluation, there was a balanced gender representation among the final beneficiaries of the Project (47% girls and 53% boys). The Project data regarding the professionals who benefitted of training courses and mentoring show that 100% were women, reflecting the female-dominated feature of the education sector⁶³ rather than the result of a specific gender-sensitive strategy employed by the Project.

⁶³ In EU the gendering of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a matter of concern. In its Communication from 2011 "Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow", the European Commission states that there is a very important issue of gender balance among ECEC, as almost all of them are women. A few countries have set targets for the recruitment of men into ECEC or sought to redesign the profession to reduce gendering. The Communication calls for measures to make a career in the ECEC sector more attractive to men in all EU countries.

5.2 Effectiveness

Evaluation of effectiveness considered the following evaluation questions:

What was the achievement level of planned results (quantitative and qualitative) for final beneficiaries (children, in particular of vulnerable ones) and target groups (parents/caregivers, professionals, service providers)?

To what extent and in what way did the Project succeed in modelling services for children under three?

What were the major factors which contributed to the progress towards the foreseen results for children, their parents, professionals and LPAs? (at output and outcome level)

Has the Project produced any additional (unplanned) significant contribution towards improving the service provision for children under three in target communities?

Main Project achievements at outcome and output levels

Analysis of Project effectiveness has been a challenging exercise for the evaluation team given the lack of targets for many indicators and unclarity concerning outcomes and outputs in the Project design documents on the background of a missing ToC. As explained in section 2 above, the evaluation has retroactively developed an implicit ToC and assigned indicators to various Project outputs and outcomes, based on the indicators included in the PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF. For the results where indicators were not specified in the Project documents, the evaluation team reconstructed the respective indicators and targets, to the extent possible, which were needed to measure the progress achieved along the results chain in the implicit ToC and respond to the EQs in the ToR. They were presented in the Inception Report (Annex 5) and approved by UNICEF. Reconstructed targets and ToC were validated with key stakeholders during the in-country mission. Data reflecting the achievements of various results (outputs and outcomes) which were not reported in the progress reports were then compiled by CNETIF, following the request of the evaluators, and triangulated with feedback from interviews and primary data collected via the structured observation grid from local authorities and principals of kindergartens.

According to the implicit ToC, the Project envisaged to achieve three outcomes and seven outputs. Their achievement level is assessed below.

► *Outcome 1 and its related outputs were achieved (Table 5).*

Access to early learning of children under three in target communities has been significantly increased as a result of establishing crèche groups in 10 kindergartens whose infrastructure was rehabilitated and where specific endowment was done to serve an overall number of 246 children (22.9% of the overall population in this age group living in the respective communities in 2014). As seen in the table below, full planned investment has been done, supplemented by local funding where needed.

Table 5. Achievement of Outcome 1-related indicators

Results	Indicators	Baseline/Target	Status at the end of project	Assessment
Outcome 1: Increased access to early learning of children under 3 in target communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. of children aged 0-3 enrolled in preschool institutions renovated and endowed with project financial support, disaggregated by gender 	0/200	246, of whom 116 girls and 130 boys	Overly achieved (123%)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> % of children under 3 enrolled in preschool institutions supported by the project of the total number of eligible children in the targeted communities, disaggregated by gender 	0/-	22.9%, of whom girls - na	<i>Not possible, lack of target</i>
Output 1.1: Physical infrastructure for PSE of children under 3 is renovated, upgraded and adjusted in selected preschools of target communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. of preschool premises rehabilitated Average value of rehabilitation per preschool (in MDL) 	0/10 0/116,000*	10 136,161	Achieved Achieved (excess covered from local contribution)
Output 1.2: Early learning conditions for children under 3 are improved in selected preschools of target communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of preschool premises endowed with furniture, toys and didactical materials Average value of goods per preschool (in MDL) Number of established crèche groups 	0/10 0/55,545* 0/10	10 55,546 10	Achieved Achieved Achieved

* targets reconstructed by the evaluation team and validated with MSIF
Source: CNETIF, Project progress and financial reports

The planned number of beneficiary children was exceeded by 23%, indicating the big demand for crèche services in the target communities, a fact which was confirmed by principals of kindergartens and professionals from rayon Education Directorates who were interviewed during the site visits. Such big demand has exerted tremendous pressure over the principals of kindergartens to accept children in the crèche-group beyond the recommended threshold of 15-20 children⁶⁴. As a result, the crèche-groups have been overcrowded in 9 out of 10 target communities, reaching an average number of 24-25 children/group (Table 6). Based on feedback provided by the key informants during the interviews and focus groups, this tendency continued after the Project ended, in 2015-2016, when the overall number of children served by the same 10 crèches reached 267 i.e. an average size of the group of 26-27 children.

Table 6. Size of crèche-groups and educators workload in target communities

Community	No. of children in crèche-group		Educators	
	2014	2015	No. of educators/ crèche-group	Daily working hours/educator
Mingir	20	22	1	9
Taraclia de Salcie	22	21	1	10.5
Călărași	29	47*	1**	10.5
Talmază	25	23	2	5
Baurci	24	27	2	5
Mîndrești	24	27	2	5
Bălți	22	21	1***	10.5
Pîrlița	26	26	1***	10.5
Coșnița	21	20	2	5
Nisporeni	33	33	1***	10.5
Total	246	267		

Source: 2014 data – CNETIF; 2015 data – focus group with educators (data collected by IPP)

* Mixed group 1.5-4 years; ** 1 educator for 3-4 days followed by another educator for the next days and the cycle is repeated; *** 1 educator for 2 days followed by another educator for 1 day and the cycle is repeated

All professionals consulted during the interview, both from central and local level, as well as UNICEF Moldova CO are aware of the quality loss which might be brought about by the overcrowding of the crèche-groups, especially where there is only one educator working for 9-10.5 hours daily (the case of

⁶⁴ Minister of Education Order 680/2013

six out of ten crèche-groups supported by the Project). At their turn, the parents consulted via the focus group, are also concerned that the educators might not be able to cope with a large group of children. The evaluation team shares the concern of the stakeholders all the more since the crèche-groups have been set up primarily to serve the interest of children rather than of the working parents. Overcrowding the groups while keeping the same staffing level confines the educators primarily to a supervisory role and less to an educational and child development role. At the same time, the available furniture, toys and didactical materials are insufficient for large groups of children, affecting the quality of the educational process. The situation is well known by the Ministry of Education, rayon Education Directorates and local authorities and efforts are being done to open new crèche-groups in the communities with high demand.

► **Outcome 2 and its related outputs were partially achieved (Table 7).**

The Project has managed to reduce the gaps in the access to early learning services for a number of 52 vulnerable children under three⁶⁵ (key rights-holders) representing a proportion of 21% of the total number of beneficiary children enrolled in the newly set-up crèche-groups. Most of these vulnerable children are living in the rural areas (7 out of 10 crèche-groups), which are known to be most disadvantaged in terms of service provision and government funding for preschool education. The group includes children left behind by both migrant parents or coming from poor, single-parent and large families are also part of the group of vulnerable children. Provision of information to a large number of parents on the importance of early learning and available service provision was aimed to stimulate the enrolment of children in the crèche-groups. However, there is no evidence to what extent parents of CwD/SEN and Roma parents were reached by the information activities of the kindergartens, due to the lack of disaggregated data.

Table 7. Achievement of Outcome 2-related indicators

Results	Indicators	Baseline/Target	Status at the end of project	Assessment
Outcome 2: Reduced equity gaps in the access of children under 3 to early learning services in target communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No and % of disadvantaged children of the total number of beneficiary children enrolled in newly-set up crèche groups, disaggregated by gender, residence, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status 	0/- CwD: 0/20 (10%)	52 children (21%), of whom: - urban/rural: 11/41 - girls/boys: na - poor: 16 - single-parent: 13 - families with many children: 9 - left behind: 14 - Roma: 0 - CwD: 0	<i>Not possible, lack of overall target</i> Not achieved (0%)
Output 2.1: Services for children under 3 are available in target rural communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. and % of rural communities selected for support 	0/7	7	Achieved
Output 2.2: Selected preschools implement inclusive enrolment policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusiveness of enrolment criteria (yes/no/partially) No of parents/caregivers informed about the importance of early learning and available service provision, disaggregated by gender, disability, ethnicity, family background of children 	na/yes* 0/-	partially 679 (no disaggregation available)	Partially achieved <i>Not possible, lack of overall target</i>

* targets reconstructed by the evaluation team and validated with stakeholders
Source: CNETIF

⁶⁵ Data provided by CNETIF. It is to be mentioned that the data collected via the structured observation grid indicate a much lower number of vulnerable children due to a different understanding of the term 'vulnerability' at the level of target kindergartens. This matter has been confirmed by principals of kindergartens during interviews.

Project data indicate the fact that two categories of disadvantaged children were left aside i.e. Roma children and CwD/SEN, although the latter have been explicitly identified as a target in the Project documents and inclusion of children with SEN was one of the topics of CNETIF trainings addressed to professionals, including principals of kindergartens. Review of Project documentation and feedback from the interviews with key informants from national and local level, focus groups with parents and educators as well as discussions with stakeholders during the site visits to target communities point to the following explanatory factors:

- *Design of the Project:* except CwD, the Project documents do not specify any other vulnerable children among final beneficiaries (e.g. Roma children, poor children, etc.) who should be given priority in enrolment, monitored accordingly and reported against set targets. Equity does not explicitly figure as a cross-cutting issue within the modelling approach of services for children under three as far as implementation strategy, accountability (results) frameworks and reporting by the two implementing partners of UNICEF are concerned. Disaggregated data were compiled at the specific request of the evaluation team, indicating that equity was not explicitly monitored and reported. In most target kindergartens, the infrastructure and didactical materials which were rehabilitated, respectively provided with the support of the Project are not adapted to the needs of CwD/SEN (data collected through the structured observation grid). This is a matter of design, specifically linked to the way the construction works and technical specifications were conceived from start.
- *Selection of target communities:* the selection was done by the Ministry of Education based on a set of criteria agreed with UNICEF i.e. number of children under three; lack of support services for children under three in the community; parents' demand for services; available space within the local kindergarten to host the crèche-group; commitment of the local authorities to contribute own funds for the rehabilitation of the space and take over the running costs to ensure sustainability of service; required rehabilitation costs able to be covered by the Project budget. There have been no vulnerability criteria used in the selection process, based on, for instance, the level of IDAM – Deprivation Index of Small Areas (calculated for rural areas)⁶⁶, Roma densely-populated communities⁶⁷, etc.
- *Enrolment policy* of kindergartens running the crèche-groups supported by the Project: enrolment of children was primarily done on the basis of the occupation status of parents (priority being given to working parents, thus perpetuating what UNESCO calls 'the labour market approach to children under 3 years and of split early childhood systems'⁶⁸) and the age of the child (mostly above two years old⁶⁹). Vulnerability was a selection criterion of children but not necessarily a priority one. In the understanding of local stakeholders, vulnerable children meant children from poor families, single-parent families, left behind by migrant parents and families with many children. None of the local key informants consulted by the evaluation identified ethnicity or disability among the qualifying vulnerability criteria, hence no specific effort has been done by kindergartens and their partners to actively encourage the enrolment of Roma children and CwD/SEN (e.g. targeted dissemination of information, raising

⁶⁶ IDAM varies largely across the ten communities targeted by the Project i.e. from 20 in Talmază and 101 in Taraclia de Salcie to 786 in Cosnita (2012 data). Source: <http://www.mec.gov.md/ro/content/indicatori-social-economici-pe-localitati> , accessed on 20 January 2016

⁶⁷ UNDP (2013), Report on the Mapping of Roma densely-populated communities in the Republic of Moldova, Chisinau

⁶⁸ The split refers to the fact that government systems are set in the mind-frame of 'childcare for working parents' and separate 'childcare' from 'early education', UNESCO (2010), "Early Childhood Care and Education", Regional Report Europe and North America"

⁶⁹ According to the feedback received from principals of kindergartens, this age threshold was used as a reference in the enrolment policy since children aged 2 have basic life skills (e.g. mobility, nutrition, use of toilet, etc.), thus allowing larger crèche-groups compared to younger children who would require more staff and smaller crèche-groups. Another reason was the fact that the existing space, endowment and nutrition was fit for this age group, based on the recommendations of the Public Health Centre.

the awareness of Roma and CwD parents as to the value of early learning for their children and confidence building in the available services, tolerance building on the side of other parents to accept and encourage inclusive crèche-groups, etc.). Not even the Project promotion put any focus on the participation of vulnerable children, but rather on highlighting the importance of setting-up crèche-groups to support parents return on the labour market⁷⁰. Other criteria used for the enrolment of children was the capacity of parents to pay for the services in addition to the monthly contribution for nutrition, thus discouraging the poor families to apply, as also confirmed by the focus group with parents and interviews in the field⁷¹, or simply “first come, first served”. Such enrolment policy hindered the access of Roma children and CwD/SEN, but also poor children, meaning exactly the categories of children who would have benefited the most from ECE according to an important body of specialised literature, including the UN Women/UNICEF study from 2013 which informed the Project. It seems that there have been no explicit guidance from CNETIF and no specific monitoring of the issue by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF. In the case of CwD/SEN, the situation was exacerbated by the lack of functional early childhood detection and intervention services able to support the identification of these children and further enrolment in the crèche-groups.

- *Involvement of multisectorial team* set up at local level to support the special protection of children under risk and of children separated from their parents⁷²: In very few communities, the team has been involved in identifying and promoting the enrolment of vulnerable children under three in kindergartens. Partnership with kindergarten principals in the prioritising of enrolment has been rare⁷³ and not been envisaged by the Project as an explicit modality to increase the inclusiveness of the enrolment policy.
- *Financial constraints*: enrolment of CwD/SEN would have required less children in a group and additional staff (specialised staff in inclusive education and support staff for basic care needs), who could not be afforded in the light of already limited financial means of the local authorities for preschool education. The principals of kindergartens have therefore refrained to actively encourage the enrolment of CwD/SEN. Feedback from the focus group with educators indicates that, at the same time, parents of CwD might be reserved to enrol their children as they fear for their security. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of parents of CwD who refused to enrol their child in the crèche apart from some anecdotal evidence. The financial constraints also explain the fact that most beneficiary children were two to three years old as smaller children would have required more staff and specific nutrition, as already explained.

► **Outcome 3 and its related outputs were partially achieved (Table 8).**

Overall, the Project has succeeded to improve the quality of educational service provision for children under three and parenting practices. It did so by developing and piloting a new service model, which included infrastructure rehabilitation in concert with empowerment of professionals and parents/caregivers to use effective practices to stimulate child development, improve health and nutrition of children enrolled in the crèche-groups.

⁷⁰ MSIF Progress Report, 3 February 2014, page 1.

⁷¹ In one target community, for instance, priority in enrolment was given to parents that contributed the most to the initial costs of setting up the crèche-group in the respective community; in addition, the monthly contribution was set at a level which is double compared to the one set by Ministry of Education Order No. 42/28 January 2013 for the nutrition of the children, thus encouraging better-off families to enrol their children in the crèche-groups. As mentioned in the UN Women/UNICEF study from 2013, “The participation of parents in financing educational services is significant, contributing to the improvement of infrastructure and the quality of educational services. However, the voluntary character of such participation should be ensured to increase the enrolment of children from poor families (only 64% of children from low income families are enrolled in early and pre-school education services compared to 86% of children from better-off families)”. There are no cases of parents who are exempted from paying the contribution for children enrolled in the crèche-groups supported by the Project.

⁷² Regulated by Law no.140/2013 and Government Decision no.270/2014.

⁷³ Only in case of extreme child neglect or when the number of children in the crèche-group was too low.

Table 8. Achievement of Outcome 3-related indicators

Results	Indicators	Baseline/Target	Status at the end of the project	Assessment
Outcome 3: Improved quality of educational service provision and parenting practices for children under 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Model of services for children under 3 designed and tested (yes/no, number) 	0/Yes, 1	Yes, 1	Achieved
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. and % of targeted parents/caregivers who use positive parenting practices to stimulate child development and provide appropriate nutrition and health care 	0/174 (80%)*	133 (61%) use practices to stimulate child development 104 (48%) use health care and nutrition practices	Partially achieved
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. and % of targeted professionals who use adequate practices to stimulate the social-affective, cognitive, and motor development of the child, as well as health care and nutrition, disaggregated by gender 	0/25*	18 (72%), of whom 18 women	Partially achieved
Output 3.1: Guides for working with children under 3 and parents are available to educators in target communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guide for working with children under 3 developed, tested and finalized 	0/1	1	Achieved
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guide for working with parents of children under 3 developed, tested and finalized 	0/1	1	Achieved
Output 3.2: Capacity of professionals to use practices to stimulate child development and collaborative learning approaches with parents/caregivers of children under 3 is strengthened	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. of professionals who completed the training courses out of those enrolled, disaggregated by gender 	0/45*	45, of whom 48 women	Achieved
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. of professionals who benefited of mentoring support on the use of child-centred methodology, disaggregated by gender 	0/40*	40, of whom 40 women	Achieved
Output 3.3: Parents/caregivers are empowered to practice positive parenting to stimulate child development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. and % of targeted parents who benefited of individual counselling, disaggregated by gender 	0/-	31 (4.6%) (gender disaggregation not available)	<i>Not possible, lack of target</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. and % of targeted parents who benefited of curriculum-based learning, disaggregated by gender 	0/218 (100%)*	174 (80%) (gender disaggregation not available)	Partially achieved

* targets reconstructed by the evaluation team and validated with CNETIF
Source: Project progress reports, assessment reports, CNETIF data

As seen in Table 9, the model of services for children under three piloted by UNICEF Moldova in ten target communities contain almost all key elements of a model design. Nevertheless, these elements are not part of a single, coherent design document, but rather dispersed across a large number of documents. The fragmented design of the model might have affected the coherence of the results framework in terms of the hierarchy of results and assignment of indicators at the relevant level, as well as the evaluability of the model (missing targets, challenges in building a counterfactual due to the lack of a control group).

Table 9. Key elements of model design

	UNICEF model (part of Project documentation)	Reference document
Hypotheses	yes	PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF
Key bottlenecks to be addressed	yes	KAP (2010), UN Women/UNICEF study (2013)
Overall objective	yes	PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF
Expected results	partially	PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF at outcome and output levels; no results specified at impact level
Indicators as basis for hypotheses	partially	PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF – outcome and output indicators, but several missing targets; no impact indicators
Envisaged implementation strategy	yes	Report of international consultant on three possible models for UNICEF pilot, PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF

Monitoring mechanisms	yes	PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF; UNICEF monitoring reports
Planned documentation of results and process	yes	PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF via progress reports; external evaluation report
Exit strategy	yes	PCA with MSIF. Agreements MSIF – LPAs in target communities
Potential national scaling up strategy	yes	External evaluation report, think tank reports, legislative initiatives of the Parliament
Dissemination	yes	External evaluation report, validation workshop
Geographical area (treatment and control)	partially	List of selected target communities. Control group not considered at the start of the modelling (only for the purpose of evaluation)
Period and budget of the model	yes	PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF
Contribution to RKLA	yes	Implicit
Key duty bearers	yes	UN Women/UNICEF study (2013), PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF
Participation principle	yes	PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF
Target groups	yes	PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF
Final beneficiaries	yes	PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF, UN Women/UNICEF study (2013)
Activities	yes	PCAs with MSIF and CNETIF

As far as its implementation is concerned, the model informed the setting up of 10 crèche-groups in 3 towns and 7 communes, of a rather high diversity in terms of quality level, determined by:

- size of the groups i.e. from 20 to 33 (see Table 6)
- age of children i.e. below 3 or mixed groups (1.5 – 4 years)
- staffing levels and workload i.e. from 5 to 10.5 working hours per day (see Table 6)
- staff training and experience i.e. educators with specific training in working with children under three, but also new comers with no specific training in dealing with this age group (as an effect of staff turnover); work experience from 2 to 40 years⁷⁴;
- parents' contribution i.e. entrance fee from 0 to 200 MDL; from 90 MDL/month to 170 MDL/month for nutrition; from 10 MDL/month to 40 MDL/month for toys and consumables (sanitary materials, office materials, etc.)⁷⁵

As far as parents/caregivers are concerned, CNETIF's assessment⁷⁶ indicates that 61% are able to use positive parenting practices to stimulate child development and almost half of them know how to supervise the health status and nutrition of the children (Box 1).

Box 1. Perceived changes in parents' behaviour towards children

Parents and caregivers were asked by CNETIF to indicate what has changed in their attitude towards children following individual and group counselling and engagement in the early education of their children. We present below some of their answers:

"I pay more attention to communicating with children and spend more time together with them", "I follow hygienic requirements", "I am more patient, pay more attention to the child", "I'm doing my best to feed him correctly", "We are more careful with the surrounding environment in order to avoid dangers", "I read her much more than in the past", "I am no longer punishing my children", "We play more with the child (football, with snow, hiding)", "We encourage and praise him for what he did well", "We try to explain instead of beating her", "We keep our promises and do not lie our children", "We try to be their friends and to understand them".

Source: CNETIF Consolidated Report on meetings with parents, (February 2015)

⁷⁴ Source: focus group with educators; site visits (direct observation)

⁷⁵ Source: focus groups with parents and educators

⁷⁶ CNETIF used an assessment methodology based on individual and group discussions with parents/caregivers and feedback on achievements and encountered difficulties.

Improvements in the parenting skills were also confirmed by parents and educators during the focus groups.

"We have homeworks to do with our girl..", "In the evening, we are told what they did, what story have they listened so that we continue at home to strengthen children's understanding, memorising...", "...I changed my behaviour. I started to explain my child various rules, rather than simply forbid him to do this or that" (Participants in the focus group with parents)

"Before, when parents came to kindergarten to pick their children up, they were usually asking the children what have they eaten, if they slept and that was all. Now, they frequently ask the children about what they learnt new, what have they liked most from what they learnt, what should rehearse at home" (Participant in the focus group with educators)

There have though been some challenges in building up positive parenting skills (hence partial achievement of the planned outcome indicator). According to CNETIF assessment report (February 2015), these challenges were mainly due to the reticence of some parents to communicate about their problems, difficulty of others to acknowledge their own behaviour mistakes, strong stereotypes concerning the way the parents need to deal with their children (usually copying the parental model from their own childhood), preference for violent punishment rather than alternative educational methods, use of unreliable information available on Internet, willingness to get results quickly but with minimum efforts, reticence to accept advice from professionals and to act accordingly, refusal to set change objectives and commit themselves to change their behaviour practices. Given these very serious challenges, the stakeholders who participated in the validation round table highlighted the crucial importance of institutionalising the function of 'parental educator' in the school, including in the ECE, as specified in the recently adopted Inter-sectorial Strategy on the development of parental abilities and competencies 2015-2021.⁷⁷

Capacity building of educators included several initiatives carried out under Outcome 3. Guides for working with children and parents of children under three were developed and made available to all relevant professionals. Interviews with key informants and focus group with educators have confirmed the fact that the guides are fully used in everyday work routine by most educators, but also by the rayon Education Directorates in their efforts to expand similar crèche services in other communities and thus increase the coverage of children under three benefitting of ECE.

In addition to guides, professionals benefited of training courses and on-the-job mentoring for increasing their capacity to stimulate the development of the children in partnership with parents/caregivers. A number of 48 professionals from rayon Education Directorates, principals of kindergartens, educators and methodologists from the ten target communities graduated the training courses provided by CNETIF. The evaluation was informed that the training was highly appreciated due to its informative, relevant, practical and interactive nature.

"When we started the work in the crèche-group I had no idea what I should do and the methodist used to point to what was wrong. But after the training courses in Chisinau I feel I am an expert, I know what I have to do. Now, when other educators are coming to our kindergarten, I am happy to give them a piece of advice. Especially when I stand in front of directors and methodists and I teach them, I feel wow!" (Participant in the focus group with educators)

Mentoring was provided by CNETIF experts through regular sessions delivered during site visits. At their turn, parents/caregivers have benefitted of individual counselling and curriculum-based learning opportunities. According to their feedback provided during the focus group, they were satisfied with the

⁷⁷ According to the Strategy, the parental educator is a professional with a socio-humanistic or medical education background (educators, teachers, doctors, social workers, psychologists, etc.), who attended a specialised training programme in parental education.

utility of content, especially with topics related to communicating with children, answering children's questions, appreciation, affectivity, domestic violence, cooperation among children and parent support.

Based on the assessment carried out by CNETIF⁷⁸, the majority of trained professionals working directly with the children (72%) have managed to internalise the new child-focused methodologies and specificities related to this fragile age group and thus be able to stimulate child development from a multi-angled perspective (socio-affective, cognitive and motor development). There have nevertheless been some challenges resulted from the inability of all educators to adapt the didactical content and strategies to the age of children, tendency to speak too much rather than stimulating children to speak, insufficient stimulation of child independence due to the tendency of educators to do things themselves instead of allowing children to do them, inability to understand the 'messages' (needs) transmitted by children during activities, difficulty of creating the context for experiential learning and of involving all children in experiential activities. During the validation round table, several national stakeholders highlighted the fact that more trainings would have been needed to ensure a full understanding of the child-focused methodologies and embedment of new knowledge and skills in the everyday routine of working with children under three.

Factors promoting or hindering effectiveness

The factors which increased the effectiveness of the Project were the following:

- **investment in both infrastructure and capacity building:** this approach made possible an increased access to early learning of children under three in target communities by providing adequate physical conditions and trained teaching staff;
- **empowerment of both professionals and parents** with effective child-centred, respectively positive parenting practices, thus building the blocks of a partnership towards the common goal of stimulating child development, better health supervision and adequate nutrition
- **blended learning approach** which combined classroom trainings with on-the-job mentoring and field monitoring to increase the knowledge and skills of professionals based on the principles of adult education and experiential learning.

At the same time, there were several factors which hindered the effectiveness of the Project, as noted in the achievement level of certain planned results, as follows:

- **enrolment policy of kindergartens:** the insufficient inclusiveness level of the enrolment policy of children under three at the level of beneficiary kindergartens left out CwD/SEN and Roma children, on the background of several weaknesses in the design of the Project and selection of target communities; financial constraints at local level have further amplified the problem (as explained above, under Outcome 2);
- **staff turnover among educators:** low salaries and long working hours have led to significant staff turnover; some trained educators left the crèche-group, being replaced by educators who did not have any induction or specific training in working with children under three (have not been trained and mentored by CNETIF or alike);
- **quality safeguards:** more effective quality safeguards and monitoring would have been needed to be built by the Ministry of Education in partnership with UNICEF and CNETIF in

⁷⁸ CNETIF used an assessment methodology based on questionnaires applied after the end of each training module, debriefings with educators on achievements and encountered difficulties, and direct observation during the mentoring and monitoring visits (recorded in an individual observation fiche).

order to ensure observance of minimum quality requirements in service provision (in particular the size of the group and staffing).

To conclude, the major continuing constraints, in particular the insufficient supply of services to cover the needs of children under three and scarce funding of preschool education (space, salaries, didactical materials, toys, etc.) for this age group, decreased the ability to deliver certain planned results at the required quality level.

Unplanned results and their implications

There is evidence of some additional, unplanned results of the piloting of services for children under three in the ten target communities. Examples of such results and their implications (effects) include the following:

- setting up of 35 new crèche groups in other localities of the target rayons, triggered by the Project; *effect: apart from the Project beneficiary children, an additional number of around 875 children under three currently benefit of crèche services and have early learning opportunities; their mothers have the possibility to return on the labour market and reconcile the professional and private life; efficient use of various deliverables of the Project, most notably the Guides for teachers; nevertheless, there are several quality issues which need to be addressed with the support of rayon Education Directorates (notably staff training, adequate furniture, sufficient supply of adapted didactical materials)*
- parents of children above three attending the kindergarten hosting the crèche-group in several communities have benefitted of group counselling and information jointly with the parents/caregivers of children under three; *effect: improved knowledge of parents of children above three concerning positive parenting practices; exchange of parental experience with their peers;*
- development of project management skills among principals of kindergartens (activity planning and implementation, work with community, funds management, tendering, evaluation, etc.); *effect: useful for any future initiative of fund raising and management of projects at kindergarten level;*
- discontinuation of services provided by a community centre for early education in a community (half-day programme) where the crèche-group was set up within the same kindergarten; *effect: displacement effect; reduced diversity of services for early education in the respective community affecting the possibility of parents to opt for the most suitable service for their needs*
- parents of children above three requested to pay an increased monthly contribution in order to support the kindergarten in one of the Project communities to close the financing gap and run the newly-set up crèche-group; *effect: substitution of roles whereby parents cover the costs which should have normally been provided by local authorities.*

There seems to be another unplanned effect of the Project on local employment. According to the Grant Agreements signed by MSIF with local authorities in target communities, the latter was supposed to suggest the construction company selected by tender to employ local labour for the rehabilitation works and to inform MSIF about the number of people actually employed (article 4.1 points d, e and i). Until the release date of this report, no data were provided by MSIF on the effect of the Project on local employment.

5.3 Efficiency

Evaluation of efficiency was based on the following evaluation questions:

How well have the implementation of activities been managed? To what extent were activities implemented as scheduled? What management and monitoring tools have been used?

How well have the Project resources been used? Were funds managed in a cost-effective manner to achieve expected results?

Did the Project ensure coherence with other relevant interventions for children under three to encourage synergy and avoid overlaps? Has the Project built upon previous interventions?

What was the role of key stakeholders and UNICEF partners in the design, coordination and implementation of Project activities? What was the role and comparative advantage of UNICEF?

Project management and monitoring

The Project has been managed in a professional and timely manner. The project management was ensured by UNICEF Moldova CO (education section) and done in partnership with two highly experienced Moldovan organisations in social infrastructure rehabilitation (MSIF), respectively ECE (CNETIF). The two partners have also contributed to the conceptualisation of thematic segments of the Project, as described in section 2. MSIF has been selected based on a direct agreement and before being micro-assessed by UNICEF, which is the standard procedure. However, given the fact that MSIF was the only organisation providing similar services in civil works at community level and on the basis of MSIF internal audits done on behalf of the World Bank, UNICEF Supply Division in Copenhagen approved the cooperation with MSIF. CNETIF was selected by tender. The Project teams established within MSIF and CNETIF were responsible for ensuring the efficiency and expertise in the operational management of the Project i.e. day-to-day technical and financial management, monitoring, quality assurance and reporting against contractual commitments enshrined in the PCAs concluded with UNICEF.

At its turn, UNICEF Moldova CO ensured a smooth implementation of the overall Project and effective communication with stakeholders, in particular with the Ministry of Education and local authorities. The feedback from stakeholders confirms that activities and management of the Project were conducted professionally and in a efficient and timely manner. **UNICEF is perceived as a respected partner and authorities at various levels as well as parents are grateful for the support provided so far.**

“UNICEF is the most reliable partner of the Ministry of Education with whom we have a long-standing cooperation. It understands very well the needs of the system” (government partner, March 2016)

“UNICEF plays a crucial role in the development of preschool education in our country. It provided us comprehensive support, not only training, but also rehabilitation of the building and provision of furniture, toys, didactical materials” (principal of a kindergarten, March 2016).

The system used by UNICEF and its implementing partners to monitor the Project is presented in Box 2 below.

Box 2. Project monitoring

The overall Project has been monitored by UNICEF Moldova CO in partnership with the Ministry of Education. Day-to-day monitoring has been ensured by MSIF and CNETIF for their specific assigned components of the Project.

It is commendable that UNICEF has carried out its monitoring visits jointly with the Ministry of Education, thus enabling transfer of knowledge and experience, increase ownership and put the building blocks for further collaboration in the development of an enabling framework for early learning service provision targeted to children under three.

Monitoring has been done on the basis of the following documents:

- a) Project Cooperation Agreements concluded with MSIF and CNETIF;
- b) Results frameworks, Activity plans and M&E plans of Project activities
- c) Progress Reports of MSIF and CNETIF;
- d) Resource utilisation plans attached to the bi-annual Project Progress Reports;
- e) Field monitoring reports of MSIF and CNETIF and Trip Reports of UNICEF, released following field visits to targeted municipalities and beneficiary kindergartens;
- f) Grant agreements concluded by MSIF with local authorities in target communities (as grant beneficiaries) and progress reports.

Results monitoring has been impeded by unclear results chain and lack of targets for several indicators, as already explained in the Effectiveness section of the report.

Process monitoring strived to assist adaptation of Project strategies to meet the arising needs in the field, but has not always managed to do it successfully. There is no evidence that issues related to enrolment policy, groups overcrowding, suitability and use of furniture and toys, etc. were identified during monitoring and reported by the implementation partners, followed by remedial actions.

Human rights principles of non-discrimination, equality, rule of law, progressive realisation of children's rights were embedded in the monitoring work. The inclusion principle was given less attention, particularly due to insufficient **risks monitoring** (for instance those related to the possible challenges concerning the inclusion of CwD/SEN in the crèche-groups).

The progress reports of MSIF were well structured and provided plenty of useful information about the implemented activities, obtained results (at output level) and utilised budget. The progress reports of CNETIF were more general, with incomplete reporting against the indicators included in the PCA. Neither MSIF nor CNETIF collected and reported **disaggregated data** (by gender, deprivation, ethnicity, disability, etc.).

UNICEF presented progress updates to the Ministry of Education and other key national stakeholders, such as the National Council for Child Rights Protection. It is worth noting that the piloting of the model (the Project) was implemented within the framework of the Rolling Work Plan between UNICEF and the Ministry of Education.

There was no **ex-post monitoring** envisaged after the end of the Project. Such monitoring might have been useful to address some of the quality and sustainability issues identified by the evaluation in March 2016 (after the end of the Project) i.e. arising from groups overcrowding, staff turnover, pressure of parents in some communities to continue to use the space rehabilitated and endowed by the Project for their children, although they passed to another preschool age category on the detriment of the children with a qualifying age for crèche-groups, parent's further need for information and counselling, etc.).

There have been no major delays in the implementation of activities. A two-month no-cost extension was granted to both MSIF and CNETIF to allow the finalisation of activities in good conditions. All implementation issues have been quickly settled, without disturbing the planned course of action. For instance, a community which failed to launch the works tender has been replaced by another community, with the agreement of UNICEF and the Ministry of Education. Most outputs were of good quality and accessible to relevant stakeholders, and the immediate impact and results of the Project were significant as confirmed by a large number of people consulted for this evaluation.

Financial management and cost-effectiveness

Financial monitoring was based on regular financial reports submitted to UNICEF by MSIF and CNETIF, HACT (Harmonized approach to cash transfers) rules and regulations⁷⁹, spot checks on utilization of funds, monitoring visits to target communities and Risk Profile Action Plan of UNICEF Moldova CO. The financial reports are well structured, including expenditures broken down per activity and types of budget categories. With few exceptions⁸⁰, the financial data reported in the financial reports indicate that **there was pretty straightforward spending as per approved budget by UNICEF, with funds spent in an accountable and cost-effective manner⁸¹.** As expected, most funds have been allocated for the civil works and endowment of crèche-groups (approximately 60%). The Project management and overhead costs (staff, communication, consumables, rent, etc.), representing 5.9% of the total budget⁸², were in line with the usual thresholds for such costs, the market prices and salary levels for the respective level of qualification, experience and responsibility in an international project. Both implementing partners have strictly followed UNICEF requirements for budget reporting and breakdown. Grants to local communities were paid in full, based on the Grant Agreement and against the actual quotations of the construction companies hired to carry out the rehabilitation works.

According to financial reports, the amount that was spent was 2,705,809.45 MDL, representing 94.6% of the budget. The average investment/crèche-group was around 215,830 MDL (16,588 USD)⁸³.

As far as **cost-effectiveness of human resources** is concerned, internal staff of UNICEF was engaged to supervise the overall implementation of the Project, review and comment on various Project outputs, without any additional costs for the Project. Local experts were hired instead of international consultants, leading to important cost savings for fees and translation costs.

Additional efficiency features of the Project consisted of the use of available premises in kindergartens for the delivery of services to children under three and centralised procurement of furniture, toys and didactical materials for all target communities in order to minimise the costs, ensure unitary endowment of all crèche-groups and ensure as far as possible coordinated implementation schedules at local level. The procurement process was transparent and guided by the value-for-money principle. There have been nevertheless some concerns that the furniture provided to few crèche-groups has not entirely been appropriate for the particular physical space available in the kindergartens. Concerns have been also raised in relation to the suitability of toys for the children⁸⁴. These issues point to the need for better tailoring of endowment in future similar initiatives and more careful monitoring of project implementation at local level to overcome arising problems.

The direct investment of the Project in each target community was 215,830 MDL⁸⁵, meaning an **initial investment/child** (space rehabilitation, endowment, capacity building of staff) was around 10,791 MDL (800.4 USD, 2014 prices). The **average value of rehabilitation works per crèche-group** was

⁷⁹ All UNICEF partners are trained in HACT, including MSIF and CNETIF.

⁸⁰ For instance, due to an underestimation of costs for the works in the target communities, the planned cost has been exceeded by 12,443 USD in the MSIF budget. Following a justified request of MSIF, based on the quotations received from construction companies, the PCA has been amended accordingly.

⁸¹ The evaluation was instructed by UNICEF that the budget breakdown and spending are internal documents and could not be annexed to this evaluation report.

⁸² It does not include UNICEF overhead costs.

⁸³ It comprises the cost for rehabilitation, endowment, development of guides, trainings and mentoring.

⁸⁴ Based on interviews with principals of kindergartens and focus groups with parents, it seems that the beds were difficult to be placed in places where there was no specifically allocated room for dormitory. In two cases, the beds were not used at all as they were considered to be of poor quality or suited for smaller children rather than the ones enrolled in the crèche-group. Three principals have also mentioned that some toys had too small parts and could have been swallowed by children in the crèche-groups; these toys have been given to older children in the kindergarten.

⁸⁵ It does not include project management, overheads and monitoring costs of UNICEF and implementing partners.

116,000 MDL, comparable to similar works carried out by MSIF in the country and having a similar objective. The evaluation team strived to construct the **running costs/child enrolled in the crèche-groups supported by the Project** and compare it with available national benchmarks⁸⁶. However, it faced challenges in collecting data from local authorities which run the respective kindergartens. The main problem was the lack of readily available disaggregated financial data at the level of municipalities by crèche-group and groups of children above 3 enrolled in the same kindergarten. The evaluation did not have the resources for an in-depth cost analysis needed to construct the cost/child and have therefore advised UNICEF to make an amendment to the existing contract with PricewaterhouseCoopers in charge of costing the preschool education services to carry out a specific analysis in the Project communities. The results of such analysis would be very much needed for the replication of the model at national level in order to estimate the overall financial envelope and inform UNICEF advocacy with the Government, in particular with the Ministry of Finance.

The Project design envisaged a certain level of cost sharing, whereby communities were required to cover minimum 15% of the costs for the rehabilitation works of the kindergartens hosting the crèche-groups. As presented in Table 10, **the overall community contribution amounted to 351,568.96 MDL, representing an average of 25.8% of the total costs of rehabilitation works. In this respect, UNICEF has managed to use its core role of leveraging resources from local communities for the benefit of children under three and their families.**

Table 10. Budget spent for rehabilitation works in target communities

Community	Amount spent for rehabilitation works (MDL)	of which community contribution (MDL)
Mingir	107,984	22,672
Mindresti	135,549	66,311
Nisporeni	127,222	51,339
Calarasi	156,694	47,438
Balti	136,980	7,495
Pirlita	164,579	49,918
Talmaza	114,407	46,894
Taraclia de Salcie	171,380	22,874
Baurci	195,814	30,627
Cosnita	51,000	6,000
Total	1,361,609	351,568

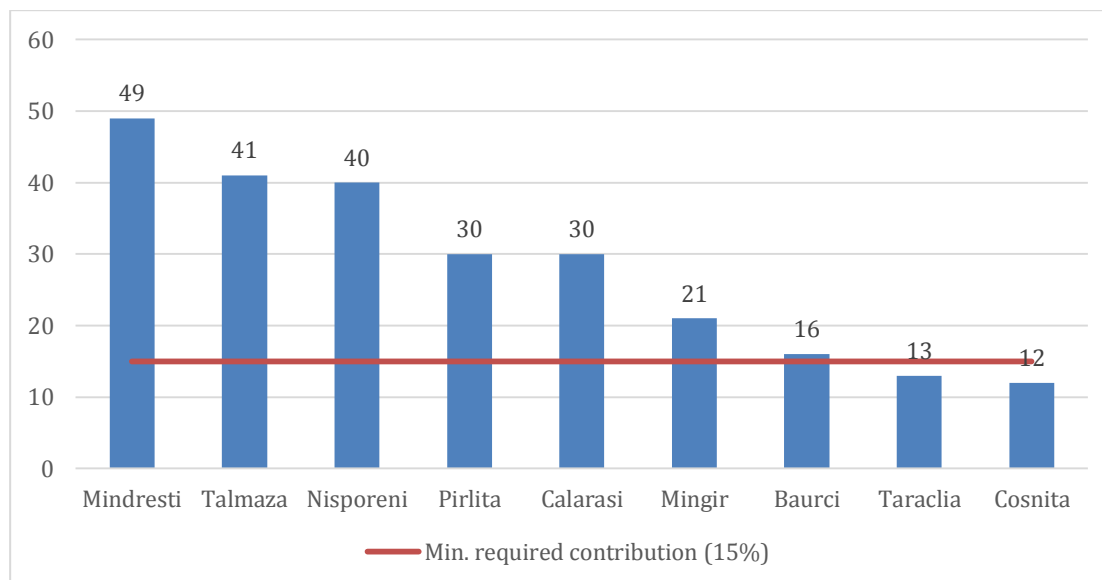
Source: MSIF data

At the same time, the contribution level varied largely among the target communities, from around 6% in Balti to almost 49% in Mindresti (Figure 4), despite the fact that each Grant Agreement signed between MSIF and target communities stipulated a minimum contribution of 15% (art. 1.3). According to MSIF, the local contribution in three communities was below the minimum threshold due to the fact that construction companies requested a lower amount for works compared to that estimated and a decision was taken at the time to use UNICEF grant in full and the difference to be covered by the respective communities. Nevertheless, that decision was not compliant with art. 1.7 of the Grant Agreements according to which community contribution should not be diminished irrespective of any

⁸⁶ A recent study commissioned by UNICEF provided several benchmarks based on the type of preschool institution and number of working hours. The most relevant for our evaluation are the following: a) **Nursery (10.5 hours working schedule)**: actual annual cost per enrolled child at actual occupancy rate - 12,300 MDL (14,900 MDL at 100% occupancy rate; suggested to be increased to 19,500 MDL to ensure adequate nutrition); b) **Kindergarten up to 80% and Nursery up to 20% (9-12 hours working schedule)**: actual annual cost per enrolled child at actual occupancy rate - 22,300 MDL. Source: PricewaterhouseCoopers (2016), "Assessment of the preschool education system and definition of the costing methodology for childcare and education services in the Republic of Moldova" (draft February 2016), Chisinau

savings obtained as a result of lower quotations tendered by the construction companies. From this perspective, additional community funding of around 17,450 MDL which could have been used for the crèche-groups was lost.

Figure 4. Community contribution to rehabilitation works (% of rehabilitation budget)



Source: MSIF data

The main sources of community contribution were parents and municipalities (in half of target communities), followed closely by rayon authorities (Table 11). In only 1 of 5 communities the municipality contributed funds from its own resources; in the other 4, the money originated from the state budget allocated to the respective community for preschool education guaranteed by the state i.e. from 3 years old and beyond. In the remaining 5 target communities there was no contribution from municipality. **This shows the severe financial constraints faced by the local authorities, in their capacity of duty-bearers, in funding services for children under three, hence the value added of the UNICEF Project in the respective communities.** As mentioned by the LPAs, rayon Education Directorates and principals during interviews, it would have been very difficult for local authorities to set up too soon crèche-groups at such quality standard. Stakeholders agreed that UNICEF has speeded up the process of developing the badly-needed service provision for children under three in their communities.

Table 11. Sources of community contribution in target communities

Community	Rayon	Municipality	Parents*	Private sector	Other sources
Mingir					
Mindresti					
Nisporeni					
Calarasi					
Balti					
Pirlita					
Talmaza					
Taraclia de Salcie					
Baurci					
Cosnita					
No. of communities	4	5	5	2	3

* Both cash and in-kind contribution

Source: data collected by IPP during interviews with local authorities, March 2016

In addition, **the Project has a significant efficiency characteristic given by its very nature, i.e. investment in early childhood education and development, which brings about tremendous returns in the future for the individuals, communities and society generally.** Numerous studies demonstrated a large range of benefits, from improved academic outcomes for children who benefitted of early childhood education and reduced dropout rates to economic savings for states⁸⁷. Another important reference document is the 2011 Communication of the European Commission⁸⁸ which notes that early childhood education and care is an essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability and that it is particularly beneficial for the disadvantaged and can help to lift children out of poverty and family dysfunction. Initial Project investment in the rehabilitation of space, endowment and development of guides and training modules for professionals could be quickly recovered in the coming years as more and more children will enrol in the crèche and benefit of child-centred early learning programmes. In other words, education and development returns in the future will pay for initial investment. From this perspective, **efficiency of the Project might have been higher on long-term in case the final beneficiaries included Roma children and CwD as well as children younger than 2, to a bigger extent.** As put it by James J. Heckman, Nobel Prize laureate in economics, *"The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth through age five, in disadvantaged families."*⁸⁹

Complementarity and synergy with relevant interventions for children under three

The evaluation found out that the Project built on the existing policy environment, formal partnerships and cooperation mechanisms with the Government and experience of working at community level. It has also built on the knowledge and lessons learnt gained from already supported initiatives in the area of ECE, such as the "Global Partnership for Education". The Project was complementary to the UNICEF-supported work of CNETIF on mentoring and parenting⁹⁰ in a large number of communities, including three target communities (Talmază, Mingir and Taraclia de Salcie) as well as to additional investment done by MSIF (via donor's support or Energy Efficiency Fund) in the preschool infrastructure of seven target communities (Taraclia de Salcie, Cosnita, Mingir, Nisporeni, Talmază, Pirlita, Mindrești),

This complementarity led to **coherent and mutually reinforcing approaches and methodologies as well as a cost-effective use of resources.** There has nevertheless been a case when implementation schedules of two projects (UNICEF and Romanian grant) have not been well correlated and led to delays in the opening of the crèche-group in two communities, as reported by parents during the focus group and interviewed principals of kindergartens.

Cooperation with stakeholders at different levels. UNICEF comparative advantage

There has been a clear assignment of roles and responsibilities for UNICEF and various implementation partners and stakeholders in the project design documentation.

⁸⁷ Reynolds, A., Rolnick, A., Englund, M. & Temple, J. (2010), "Early childhood development and human capital"; Heckman, J., Moon, S.H., Pinto, R., Savelyev, P.A., Yavitz, A. (2009), "The Rate of Return to the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program"; Hill, C. (1999), "Early Learning, Later Success: The Abecedarian Study", Highlights of the Age 21 Follow-up Study: University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Center

⁸⁸ European Commission (2011), "Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow", Communication from the Commission, COM(2011) 66 final, Brussels, 17.2.2011

⁸⁹ <http://www.heckmanequation.org/content/resource/invest-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-economy> accessed on 25 March 2016

⁹⁰ "Assessment of social change interventions on positive parenting" and "Monitoring of mentoring at local level" are two separate components of the PCA signed by UNICEF with CNETIF. The other component is "Modelling of services for children under 3", which is part of the object of evaluation.

UNICEF has managed to efficiently use its comparative advantages for the successful implementation of the Project, in particular its top level experience in child rights which informed the design of the Project and excellent reputation in the country. It was also an active and tenacious advocate for the rights of children under three to early education, based on generation of solid evidence on the needs and benefits⁹¹, thus preparing the ground for sustainability and replication of the model country-wide.

Cooperation of UNICEF with central authorities, in particular with Ministry of Education, but also with other relevant line ministries (labour and social protection, health, finance) and National Council for Child Rights Protection went very well. Interviews with key informants confirmed that they have been consulted on the needs and priorities of children under three. They were also informed about the results of the study on supply and demand (UN Women/UNICEF, 2013) and existing models at international levels. The Ministry of Education has been also involved in the selection of target communities and paid field monitoring visits together with UNICEF, as already presented above.

At local level, cooperation of UNICEF, MSIF and CNETIF with LPAs, rayon Education Directorates and kindergartens went also very well and there have been no particular issues reported to the evaluation team. There were extensive consultations with the local communities to present the benefits of early learning for children under three and get the local commitment for a successful implementation at the Project in the respective communities. The staff was cooperative and the deadlines were generally respected. The only area where better coordination and more active engagement would have been required refer to the multisectorial teams as far as identification of vulnerable children for priority enrolment in crèche-groups was concerned.

⁹¹ Most notably, UN Women/UNICEF study (2013) on supply and demand, studies contracted by UNICEF with Expert Group on parental leave (2015) and PricewaterhouseCoopers on costing of services (2015), etc.

5.4 Impact

Evaluation of impact considered the following evaluation questions:

To what extent has the Project impacted on the learning and development outcomes of children under three in the target communities (treatment group) compared to those in the control group?

What were the effects of the Project on the employment status of mothers of children under three in the target communities?

What is the potential of the Project to support positive and realistic policy and regulatory framework changes for children under three?

Impact on the learning and development outcomes of children under three

According to implicit ToC, the Project aimed to contribute to improved learning and development outcomes for targeted children under three in line with international human rights standards and the principle of progressive realisation of child rights. Assessment of quantitative impact was not possible, as explained in the evaluation limitations in section 4.4 above.

Nonetheless, the evaluation has sought to assign plausible qualitative contributions of the Project to higher level results using the available Project data, triangulated with feedback from focus groups with parents and professionals children as well as expert opinion of selected key informants. Applying the results evidenced under the Effectiveness section above onto the indicative logic model presented in the methodology would indicate these contributions, assessed against the following indicators presented in the Inception Report:

- **Indicator: Satisfaction level of parents/caregivers concerning the effects of new services on the development of their children (high/good/modest/low)**

Parents, in their capacity of both duty-bearers and rights-holders, are satisfied **and grateful for the learning opportunities provided to their children** in the crèche-groups set up with the support of the Project and particularly for the **possibility to return on the labour market**. Most appreciated are the daily activities, the interaction with educators, the way they manage to engage parents in the education of their children and overall professionalism of the staff. Due to educators, children go with pleasure to kindergarten and are very attached to them.

"My children are eager to get up in the morning in order to go to the kindergarten, as Ms. 'A' is very special to them, a second mother" (parent participating in the focus group, March 2016)

With few exceptions related to the suitability of beds, parents are pleased with the endowment of the crèche-groups. Concerns were mainly raised in relation to the overcrowding of the crèche-groups.

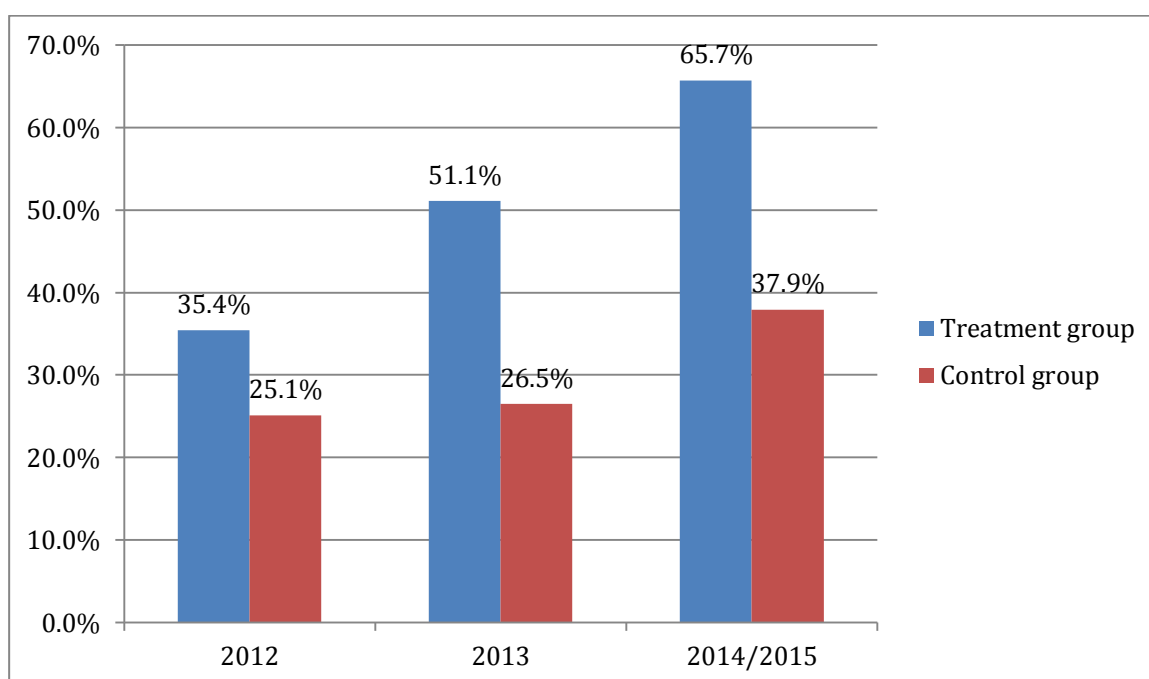
Parents from the control group could enrol their children only if the kindergarten in their community formed the so-called 'mixed groups' i.e. children under three in the same group with older children. If not available, parents have to stay with their children at home or hire a baby-sitter who is not trained and not always affordable by more deprived families. Based on data reported by the kindergartens through the structured observation grid, the coverage rate of children under three in preschool

education is almost two times lower in the control group compared to the target (beneficiary, 'treatment') group i.e. 8.1% compared to 15.4%⁹². The mixed groups are usually more overcrowded than the ones in the target communities. There are long waiting lists and parents need to apply for a place in the kindergarten as early as the birth of the child. As in the case of treatment group, there are no Roma children or CwD/SEN enrolled in the kindergartens of the control group; however, the prejudices and intolerance of parents and even professionals seem to be much stronger than in the treatment group.

The parents from the control group who managed to enrol their child complain about the lack of specialised staff able to work with small children, improper physical space and lack of adequate furniture and didactical materials. The proportion of educators trained in early learning is two times more in the treatment group compared to the control group (2013-2015), indicating the value added of the trainings and mentoring provided by the Project for the professionalization of the staff (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Educators in kindergartens who benefited of training in early learning

-% of total number, 2012-2015-



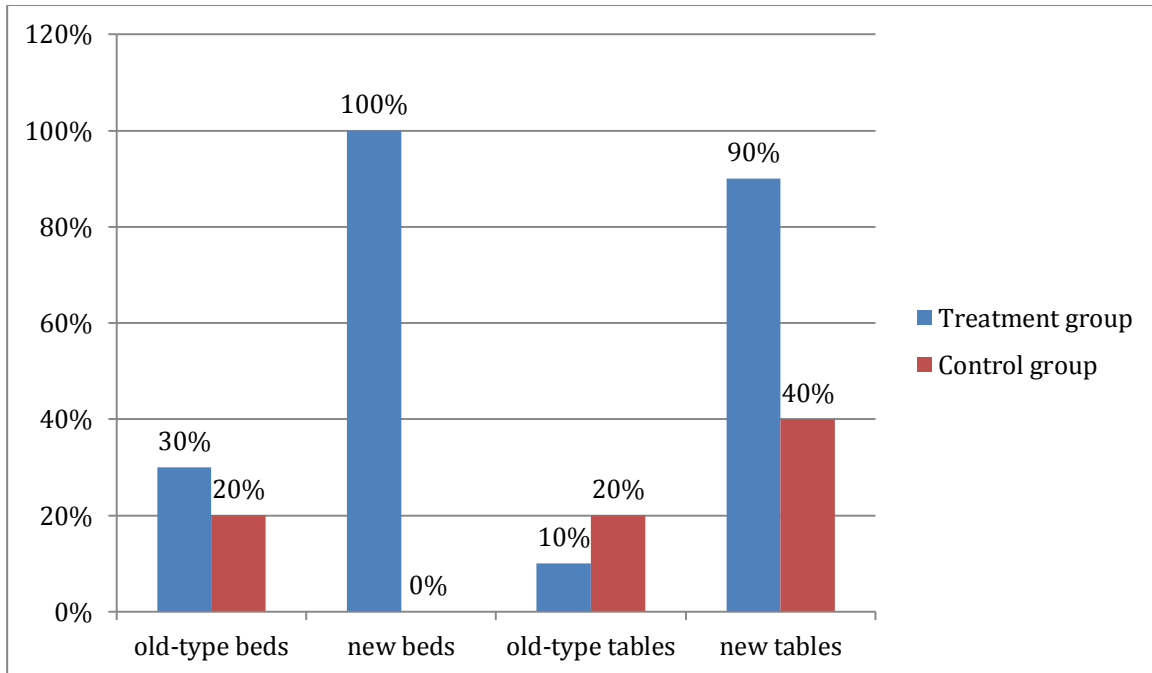
*Note: Figures refer to all educators in the respective kindergartens, for all age groups of children
Source: Data compiled by IPP based on structured observation grid*

Figures 6 and 7 present a comparative analysis of the endowment level of the treatment and control groups. Data shows a much better endowment of the kindergartens from the treatment group with furniture, didactical materials and equipment for children under three, as a result of the Project.

⁹² Calculated by IPP based on data compiled via the structured observation grid. CNETIF reported a higher coverage rate in 2014 in the treatment group of 22.9% (see Effectiveness section). Inconsistency of data between the two sources are apparently due to the failure of several kindergartens to provide complete and reliable information. Nevertheless, irrespective of data source, the coverage rate of children under three in preschool education is at least two times higher in the treatment than control group.

Figure 6. Endowment of kindergartens with furniture for children under three

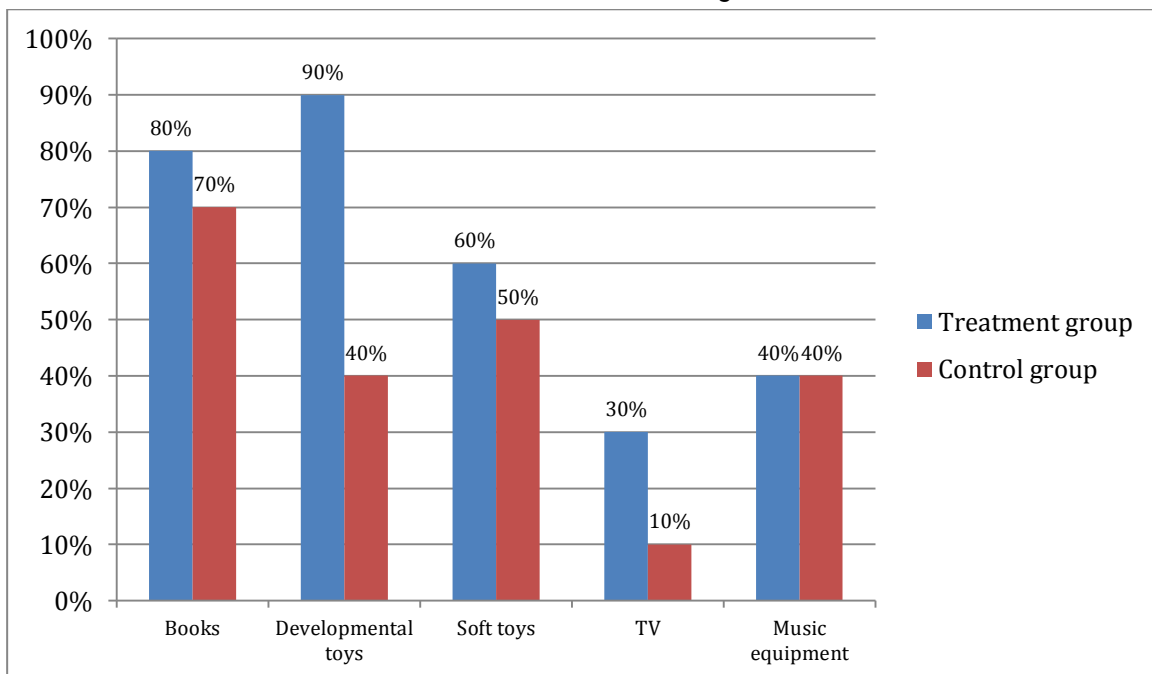
- % of total number of kindergartens, 2015-



Source: Data compiled by IPP based on structured observation grid

Figure 7. Didactical materials and equipment for children under three in kindergartens

-% of total number of kindergartens, 2015-



Source: Data compiled by IPP based on structured observation grid

Both parents from the 'treatment' and control groups consider that the monthly contribution is affordable, but might raise difficulties for the poor families. As to the working hours of the crèche-groups, respectively mixed groups, parents from both groups consider that the programme is too short

for those who work outside their resident locality and would prefer a 12-hour programme compared to the current one of 10.5 hours.

As far as observed learning and development outcomes are concerned, **parents from the 'treatment' group were able to identify several positive effects on their children as a result of attending the crèche-groups** (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Effects of the Project on beneficiary children (parents' perspective)

Motor development	Socio-affective development	Cognitive & language development	Health and nutrition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •able to handle the pen and pencil •go to the toilet self •dance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •communicate and interact better with children and adults (parents, educators, relatives) •have a polite behaviour towards others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •have an enriched vocabulary •speak correctly •know poems, stories and songs, colours and geometric figures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •regular feeding and sleeping •diversified nutrition

In order to assess the effects of the crèche services on their children, parents used several modalities i.e. direct observation of behaviour, knowledge and skills acquired by the children; classroom and home works of children; performance during concerts and other festive events; and individual discussions with educators.

Parents from the control group with children attending the mixed groups have identified a limited number of positive effects on their children, primarily related to speaking, interaction with parents and healthy nutrition.

- ***Indicator: Preschool professionals are able to indicate at least 2 examples of progress made by beneficiary children in each of the child development areas: social-affective, cognitive, motor; health care and nutrition, as a result of the Project (yes/no/partially)***

The evaluation was informed by the professionals who were consulted during interviews and focus groups that the impact of the Project on beneficiary children is obvious in terms of motor, socio-affective and cognitive development as well as in terms of health and nutrition. They have been able to identify between 2-5 effects in each of these child development areas, as seen in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Effects of the Project on beneficiary children (professionals' perspective)

Motor development	Socio-affective development	Cognitive & language development	Health and nutrition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •can manipulate objects •can put on shoes •fastens buttons • dresses and undresses self •eat independently 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •form and sustain positive relationships •experience, manage and express emotions towards parents, children, educators •display empathy towards others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •verbal representation •know basic colours and story herous •able to narrate stories •give complete answers to questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •positive daily routines • diversified nutrition

Professionals assessed the effects of the crèche services on children mainly using structured observation fiches, adaptation fiches, mid-term and year-end monitoring indicators (educators); individual and group discussions with parents, analysis of children’s behaviour and performance during various events which are video-recorded (educators and principals); site monitoring visits (rayon education specialists).

Professionals from the control group were able to identify limited effects derived from the attendance of mixed groups i.e. socialising, better communication and security.

- **Indicator: Contribution of the Project to the progressive realisation of children’s rights in target communities (none/modest/good/significant)**

The Project had a significant contribution to the implementation of the principle of progressive realisation of children’s rights in Moldova which was part of the monitoring of human rights principles in general. It did so through: analytical and assessment work to provide evidence on the demand for ECE services for children under three and shortcomings in the supply of such services; opening up of access to organised early childhood education programmes for children under three; introduction of child-centred practices in ECE of children under three; development of the understanding of professionals, as duty-bearers, on their role in providing quality education services and of their capacity to allow them perform at highest professional standards and based on an efficient partnership with parents.

Effects of the Project on the employment status of mothers of children under three

Available data confirm that there is a correlation between the availability of early and preschool education services and women’s employment. Provision of affordable early childhood services improves the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities and allows the participation of mothers in the market place. Limited access to preschool institutions determines women, who are employed, to stay at home for an extended period, affecting their qualification and employability, or raises barriers against women’s full-time employment, forcing women toward low-paid, part-time jobs. **By setting up crèche-groups, the Project allowed a number of 108 women to return to their former workplace, get a new job or, in some cases, work as seasonal/day labourer** (Table 12).

Table 12. Project impact on participation of women on the labour market (2014-2015)

Community	No. of mothers
Mingir	9
Mindresti	11
Nisporeni	27
Calarasi	10
Balti	11
Pirlita	5
Talmază	10
Taraclia de Salcie	13
Baurci	7
Cosnita	5
Total	108

Source: Data compiled by the evaluation team during interviews in target communities, March 2015

The lack of gender disaggregated data impeded the analysis of the Project impact upon the level of fathers' engagement in childhood learning and caring and use of positive parenting practices. Nevertheless, according to the feedback provided by the rayon Education Directorates and evaluation reports of CNETIF, fathers of beneficiary children participated in the training and counselling activities implemented by the Project, and, as a result, have much closer relationships with their children and a better understanding of the importance of getting engaged in their education.

Contribution to policy and regulatory framework changes for children under three

The Project has undoubtedly a significant potential to influence positive changes of policies targeting children under three and corresponding amendments of the existing legal framework, primarily through providing results-based evidence from 10 communities where 246 children, 218 parents and 45 professionals have benefitted of support through the piloting of UNICEF model of service provision.

It has already done so in concert with other UNICEF initiatives on ECE, by informing policy inputs and advocacy for the development of the Strategy "Education 2020", Education Code (articles 23-24), the Inter-sectorial Strategy concerning the development of parental abilities and competencies 2015-2021 and the Action Plan for the implementation of the Child Protection Strategy 2014-2020.

It has also provided additional evidence to strengthen the findings of the study on supply and demand of ECE services (2013) and on parental leave (2015) already mentioned above, which led to three Parliamentary initiatives in October 2015. These initiatives are aimed to amend the legal framework for increasing the access of children to state guaranteed services from the age of 2 (compared to 3 at the moment) and for the provision of allowances to uninsured parents until children are 2 years old (compared to 1.5 years old at the moment). The Parliamentary initiatives await approval in the plenary. The Project has also the potential to inform the envisaged UNICEF initiative to work with the Government for the development of a formula for capita financing in preschool education, including for children under three. At community level, the Project has influenced amendments to local Strategic Development Plans concerning the promotion and financing of early education. The results of this evaluation are also aimed to provide information, findings and recommendations for improved policies in the area of ECE and changes in the regulatory framework.

5.5 Sustainability

Evaluation of sustainability considered the following evaluation questions:

Are the services for children under three still functioning in the target communities one year after the end of the Project? Have they been institutionalised in target communities?

What measures has the Project put in place to ensure the sustainability of results?

What factors are likely to hinder or support the sustainability of results, i.e.: regulatory framework, capacity of preschool education professionals, financial resources at local level to continue financing services for children under three?

Current functioning of services for children under three

One year after the end of Project support, **all 10 crèche-groups set up in the target communities are functioning at full capacity, are in big demand and, despite some challenges mentioned above, parents are satisfied with the quality of services.** Based on data reported by the kindergartens, the number of children enrolled in the crèche-groups has been kept more or less identical. The working hours are still the same i.e. 10.5 hours.

There is a comparable staffing level to the one during the Project lifetime; however not all educators trained by CNETIF are in place. In four cases, a decision was taken by principals and parents whereby trained educators will continue to work with the same children until the age of 6/7 and therefore they will no longer be responsible of the crèche-group; in other cases, due to staff turnover, trained educators have been replaced by new comers who were not provided specific training in working with children under three, apart from sporadic mentoring by the principal of the respective kindergarten and provision of the Guides developed by the Project.

As far as premises are concerned, only seven out of ten crèche-groups are functioning in the spaces rehabilitated and endowed by the Project. In the other three cases, the crèche-groups operate in another space made available within the kindergarten, which is not entirely adequate for this age group. This is the result of parents' belief that their children are entitled to use the rehabilitated space although they no longer have the eligible age for the crèche-group, motivated by the initial contribution made by the parents for the rehabilitation of the physical space; hence. It seems that there has been insufficient clarity concerning the entry-exit rules in the crèche-groups, hence strong parents' pressure upon principals to allocate other space to smaller children.

Interviews with rayon Education Directorates and LPAs tend to confirm that the services piloted by the Project are currently part of the regular service provision for children under three in the respective communities. Nevertheless, it is the opinion of the evaluation that support to communities is still needed for **increasing access and coverage of vulnerable children in preschool education until solid rights-based foundations of practices and procedures are built and sustainable capacities are in place to ensure that systems run effectively and at the required quality standards.**

Measures put in place to ensure sustainability of results

Sustainability of the crèche-groups was planned to be ensured by a contractual commitment of the LPA to keep the purpose of the rehabilitated space for a period of at least 15 years and avoid its privatization as well as to allocate annual funding out of local budget for the functioning of the crèche-group and maintenance of the space. These provisions were the subject of an official decision of the LPA which were appended to the Requests for Financing submitted to MSIF and were in line with article 5.1 points d and e, of the Grant Agreements signed between MSIF and LPAs.

The result is that all crèche-groups set up by the Project are still functioning, although not at an optimal quality level, as detailed above.

Factors supporting or hindering sustainability of Project results

► *Policy and regulatory framework*

The current policy and legal framework governing the preschool education system in Moldova is generally supportive for the development and expansion of early childhood education services for children under three put in place by the Project as well as for improvement of child-centred pedagogical methodologies and skills of professionals according to quality and professional standards. As already explained in the Relevance section, the Project goes in line with the existing policies and legislation in the area of education, particularly the Strategy “Education 2020”, National Child Protection Strategy and the Education Code which provide a good basis for expanding the access and coverage of preschool education over the next years. There is however an important constraint which needs to be overcome would the strategic goals of the strategies be accomplished i.e. ECE for children under three is not guaranteed by the state and the scarce resources at local level makes difficult the setting up and running of crèche-type services by the LPAs in poorer communities or keeping the existing ones at an acceptable quality level⁹³. UNICEF Moldova CO is in permanent contact with the education authorities, the National Council for Child Rights Protection and the Parliament, carrying out an energetic evidence-based advocacy to inform the amendment of the legal framework towards increasing the access to ECE for children under three, in particular of the most vulnerable ones.

The evidence provided by the Project concerning the benefits of ECE upon child development as well as UNICEF work on costing the services and its planned initiative of developing a minimum standard service package for children of preschool age will form an important body of arguments for the continuation of reforms and expansion of preschool education provision for children under three in the country. Due to the Project, the physical infrastructure allows the 10 kindergartens to accommodate next generations of children in crèche-type programmes (furnished classrooms with furniture, equipment, didactical materials, etc.). Feedback from Education Directorates confirms **the high demand for ECE services for children under three in the respective rayons, which is likely to act as a lever for resource mobilisation in the future** (Table 13). According to various studies consulted for the purpose of this evaluation and interviews with key informants at central level, there is a very high demand practically in all rayons of the country.

⁹³ Two parents who participated in the focus group discussions complained that the municipality was not able to employ an additional educator due to the lack of funds, although the group was very large.

Table 13. Demand for crèche-type services in target rayons (number of localities/rayon)

Locality	No. of needed crèche groups	of which having space*:	
		available	unavailable
Hîncești	20	15	5
Telenești	17	na	na
Nisporeni (town)	28	na	na
Călărași (town)	19	na	na
Stefan Vodă	4	3	1
Ungheni	17	11	6
Cahul	1	-	1
Dubăsari	1	1	-
Balti (city)	12	6	6
UTAG	2	1	1

* space for hosting a crèche-group for around 20 children, able to accommodate daily activities and a dormitory; na = information not available

Source: Based on data compiled by IPP through interviews (March 2016)

► **Capacity of preschool education professionals**

Investment of the Project in human capital was aimed to compensate the shortage of knowledge and skills of professionals in ECE for children under three. According to the findings of the evaluation, all professionals who benefitted of these learning opportunities reported positive experience from the trainings and mentoring in terms of knowledge acquisition and skills development. During the focus group discussion, educators were able to give practical examples to illustrate their statements and highlight specific areas concerning children's rights that they would like to improve in their work. Based on CNETIF assessment, most professionals (72%) have embedded **the acquired knowledge and skills in their usual work routine with children and parents and use child-centred methodologies to stimulate child development.**

Parents, in their capacity of both duty-bearers and rights-holders, have expressed particular appreciation for the educators whom they consider to be well qualified and mastering efficient methods of working with their children, with excellent learning results. However, as mentioned above, not all trained educators are still working with children in the crèche-groups and there was no mitigation strategy put in place for coping with staff turnover (e.g. induction training, work shadowing, etc.). As confirmed by the Ministry of Education, **the guides, training curricula, parents' counselling and educators' mentoring approaches and assessment methodologies developed by the Project provide nevertheless an excellent starting point for developing a standard programme of continuing training to be attended by all professionals who work with children under three,** all the more since very little is taught on the matter in the pre-service university programmes.

Meanwhile, the guides developed by the Project have been disseminated to kindergartens from other localities and are used by the principals of kindergartens and by educators working with children under three. They are also supported by the specialists from the Rayon Education Directorates who participated in the trainings organised by the Project through on-the-job advice, round tables, exchange of experience, workshops and pedagogical activities. In this manner, the outreach of Project outputs is enhanced which is an important sustainability feature of UNICEF support.

► **Financial resources**

It was mentioned above that LPAs have committed to allocate annual funds for the running of crèche services and maintenance of the renovated space. Data collected from the municipalities during the site visits show that the main financing sources are the state budget and parents' contribution. Although the state budget could finance only the preschool education for children above three, the local authorities used the funds allocated to the respective community for covering the costs of the crèche-groups as well. This arrangement is highly informal and the Ministry of Finance confirmed that it cannot continue to function as it is, in case these crèche-type services expand nationally.

As mentioned in the Impact section, there is a Parliamentary initiative from October 2015 which is aimed to amend the Education Code in order to increase the access of children to state guaranteed services from the age of two rather than three at the moment. If adopted, funding for crèche-groups would be fully covered from state budget. This initiative echoes the point of view of parents and professionals working in the preschool education system at all levels. It is currently on the agenda of the Parliament for debate in the plenary and adoption, although it has not been endorsed by the Ministry of Finance due to the lack of resources.

At the moment, alternative solutions (such as amendments to the legal framework to enable private kindergartens to be set up and function) are being sought, especially for covering the need in urban areas where the demand for services is huge. A strategy which is pursued by UNICEF in partnership with the Ministry of Education is to develop a financing formula per capita for children in preschool education to be guaranteed by the state, including for children under three. LPAs are also partnering with the kindergartens to raise funds through application to various government and donor-funded programmes, especially in the area of school infrastructure and energy efficiency. Although confronted with severe financial constraints, the municipalities are committed not to give up:

"We need to aim at setting up new crèche-groups. Closing down the existing group is out of question" (LPA representative, interview March 2016).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusions

- UNICEF has designed and successfully piloted a model of services for children under three (called ‘the Project’ in the former sections of the report) in ten target communities in Moldova with the aim of rolling them out nationally to cover the gap in service provision for this age group. The piloted services proved to be highly relevant for the needs of children, parents and professionals as well as fully in line with the national priorities and international human rights commitments of the country. They remained relevant in time, as demonstrated by the persistently high demand of parents over the lifetime of the piloting period and after.
- Implementation of the model has delivered valuable results in terms of: a) increased access of children under three to early learning opportunities in target communities, especially of children living in rural areas; b) developed positive parenting practices to enable parents to stimulate child development and provide appropriate nutrition and health care; and c) strengthened capacity of professionals to apply child-centred methodologies in their work with children in the crèche-groups. With few exceptions, the overall effectiveness level of UNICEF intervention in target communities was found to be adequate and rather close to what was planned by its designers.
- At a higher-level results in the ToC, an objective, quantitative assessment of model contribution to learning and development outcomes could not be done due to the lack of key prerequisites and resources explained in the section on limitations of the evaluation. Nevertheless, parents and professionals observed improvements in the social-affective, cognitive and motor development of children enrolled in the crèche-groups, which are likely to have been contributed to enhanced learning and development outcomes of the beneficiary children. The setting up of crèche-groups has also helped almost half of beneficiary mothers to return on the labour market. The qualitative assessment of impact indicates a positive contribution of the piloted services on the progressive realisation of children’s rights.
- The model has been implemented in a professional and culturally-sensitive manner, with funds spent in a transparent and efficient way. UNICEF made use of its core role to leverage resources from local communities for the benefit of children under three and their families. Efficiency of monitoring has been impeded by the lack of a clear hierarchy of results in the model design and insufficient attention given to quality and risks monitoring during the piloting of the services.
- As far as sustainability is concerned, one year after the end of UNICEF support, all ten crèche-groups function at full capacity, with running costs covered by the state budget (via the allocation provided to municipalities for preschool education) and parents. The model has triggered the setting up of crèche-groups in other localities, however with a lower quality level.
- The piloting of the model was instrumental in highlighting what could be done and how, by investing an average amount of 800 USD/child for infrastructure rehabilitation, endowment, capacity building of professionals and empowerment of parents to use positive parenting skills. Expansion of the model in other localities would require a smaller investment since there will be no need to redevelop guides, training curricula, mentoring methodologies, technical specifications for works and goods which are already available.

- At the same time, the piloting of the model drew the attention on the possible risks which might occur during implementation and which should be addressed with priority in case of rolling it out at national level. They refer to equity and quality.

Equity

The piloted services have increased the number of children receiving early education, but had limited relevance to vulnerable children, in particular CwD and Roma children, who were left out. The main reasons were the insufficiently inclusive enrolment policy of the kindergartens hosting the crèche-groups and limited engagement of the multidisciplinary teams - set up at local level to support the special protection of children under risk and of children separated from their parents - in prioritising vulnerability at enrolment. Financial constraints further discouraged the enrolment of CwD given the challenges raised by the adaptation of the space, furniture, didactical materials, size of the crèche-group and staffing level to the particular needs of these children. Intolerance and social norms raised additional challenges. It seems that there have been no explicit guidance and monitoring of the inclusiveness issue by the Ministry of Education, UNICEF and the implementing partners.

Quality

The tremendous demand for crèche-type services resulted in some overcrowded crèche-groups, with no additional staff, space or endowment. It impacted on the quality of the educational and child development process in the respective crèche-groups, the educators being confined to a supervisory role primarily. The model did not envisage any quantitative assessment of the learning and development outcomes reached by the beneficiary children in order to be able to analyse the results and take corrective measures, as needed. Another element which affected quality was staff turnover (educators who left the kindergarten or who continued to work with the children until 6/7). There was no system in place to provide induction training to new comers or any other form of in-service training, apart from some sporadic mentoring by the principal and provision of the guides developed by CNETIF. The lack of clear entry-exit rules in the crèche-groups made the space rehabilitated and endowed by UNICEF support to be used in several cases by the children who passed the crèche age due to their parents' insistence to 'protect' their initial investment. It meant that in those cases the new generation of children under three were deprived of the infrastructure rehabilitated and endowed within the piloted model of services. The furniture was not always adapted to the needs of particular kindergartens. These issues might have been addressed more efficiently in case the design of the model included a coherent results framework, with clear quality safeguards to be monitored during the piloting of the model in the communities. An ex-post monitoring would have been also very useful to address some of the quality issues aroused after the end of piloting.

- **The model represents a significant step forward in the process of establishing the underlying framework and practices for broadening the access of children under three to early learning and development. The evidence provided by the model is a powerful tool in the process of advocating for positive changes of policies targeting this age group and corresponding amendments of the existing legal framework. Equity and quality should nevertheless remain at the heart of the rolling out process at national level and measures need to be taken to ensure that the underlying causes of exclusion are addressed and that the service provision strictly comply with quality standards.**

- **The model has been already replicated in other localities and several new crèche-groups were set up with running costs primarily covered from the state budget allocation for preschool education for children above three, with the tacit agreement of financial authorities. However, rolling it out at national level has a totally different dimension and would require an important financial effort that could no longer be accommodated by the existing state budget allocation and the local communities cannot afford with the existing scarce resources. The overall conclusion is that the model is replicable nationally in case there is specific state budget allocation for ECE services for children under three, ring-fenced in the total allocation for preschool education transferred to municipalities. There are good reasons for that given the very valuable results attained by the model in the target communities and country-wide high demand for such services which is likely to act as a lever for resource mobilisation in the future.**
- The model is not and should not be the only option for children under three and their parents. It provides an example of possible services that could address the needs. The 'market' of services for children under three should be populated by a range of services, public and private, with various working hours, etc. to ensure flexibility of choice for parents, according to their particular needs. Amendment of the legal and policy framework should make sure that it promotes a flexible supply of services, including private ones which would ease the state financial burden, in concert with changes in the social protection provisions for parents of children under three, as per current Parliamentary initiatives.

6.2 Recommendations

The recommendations presented in Table 14 below are based on the findings and conclusions of the evaluation as well as on active consultation with all key stakeholders that were interviewed during the field phase. Each interview, focus group and round table has checked the perceptions of various stakeholders (UNICEF, ministries, LPAs, rayon Education Directorates, professionals, parents, service providers, development partners, CSOs) concerning the top priorities concerning the top priorities of the early childhood education and development reforms in Moldova that needs to be addressed in the coming years and consequently the role each of these stakeholders should play (see Interview Guides in Annex 5).

Validation of recommendations was done in two phases: 1) by UNICEF, following submission of the draft report; and 2) by national stakeholders during the presentation of the evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations during a validation round table. The feedback from key stakeholders, detailed in section 4.3 above, has been incorporated in the Final Evaluation Report. The evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations have been also disseminated by UNICEF to all relevant decision-makers to agree further lines of action for increasing access of children under three to ECE services and expansion of the piloted model at national level.

The recommendations are addressed to the Government of Moldova, UNICEF and stakeholders at national and local levels, in line with the ToR and the need to engage all major stakeholders in a concerted effort for the continuation of reforms on the advancement of child rights in Moldova.

Recommendations are divided into two categories, as follows:

O - Operational recommendations

SP - Strategic and Programmatic recommendations

Each recommendation has an addressee and a proposed timing and it includes references to findings of the evaluation to substantiate the proposed course of action.

! As indicated by the suggested timing (last column of Table 14 below), **priority should be given to Recommendations SP1 (Policy brief), O1 and O2** where action is to start as soon as possible.

Table 14. List of Recommendations

A. Recommendations for the scaling up of the model of services for children under three

No	Recommendations	Addressee	Timing
Strategic and Programmatic Recommendations (SP)			
SP1	<p>Ensure the prerequisites for the expansion of the model of services for children under three at national level</p> <p><i>Description:</i></p> <p>The replication of the service model nationally would require strong evidence of demand for services and record of positive results originated from piloting, an enabling legal environment, available resources for initial investment and running costs based on a robust costing analysis and financial estimate, qualified staff, equity safeguards and quality assurance procedures. Some of these prerequisites are already met.</p> <p>It is recommended that UNICEF in partnership with the Ministry of Education develops a Policy Brief by putting together the evidence of demand and results generated by the piloting (including the results of this evaluation); a financial estimate for rolling out the model country-wide (including the initial investment in the optimisation of the existing pre-/school network and endowment as well as operational costs, see O2 below); potential financing formulas and sources; and a roadmap including clear milestones and prioritised phases (in case resources do not allow a full implementation from start). The Policy Brief would be presented to decision-makers in order to get their commitment for implementation. As far as other key prerequisites are concerned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal framework: The evaluation fully endorses the Parliamentary initiatives for the amendment of the legal framework which would ensure a clear, transparent and legal mechanism for state financing of ECE as early as the age of two and the obligation of municipalities to provide access to early learning services to all children aged two and above. • Equity safeguards: Equity should be at the core of rolling out strategy, acknowledging that priority must be given to the most vulnerable children (CwD and Roma included), even in circumstances where supply limits access to relatively low percentages of the population. Outreach policies and systems would require various professional practices to identify, assess, refer and support children with various 	<p>Ministry of Education and UNICEF</p> <p>Parliament with lobby from UNICEF and Ministry of Education</p> <p>UNICEF in partnership with Ministry of Education, engaging other relevant line</p>	<p>Second half of 2016</p> <p>End 2016</p> <p>2016</p>

No	Recommendations	Addressee	Timing
	<p>needs; hence an increased role and better functioning of multidisciplinary teams are needed (as explained in the Effectiveness section) as well as early childhood detection and intervention services for identification of small CwD/SEN and targeted support to attend ECE. UNICEF can play a significant role in this process, by bringing together education, health care and child protection to identify and address the needs and maximise the benefits of ECD services in the realisation of children’s rights and breaking intergenerational cycles of exclusion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualified staff: Capacity building is key to ensuring a successful replication of the model nationally. Attracting, educating, and retaining suitably qualified staff is a great challenge, as pointed out in the Strategy “Education 2020”. Trends in the integration of childcare and education are increasing the professionalisation of staff working in early childhood services. Staff working with children under three should be provided access to up-to-date learning opportunities for personal and professional development. Monitoring of learning outcomes and continuous improvement of knowledge and skills should be a priority. Regular skills profiling to check gaps between the existing expertise and demand deriving from expansion of the model and from beneficiaries should be carried out to inform the staff development policy of kindergartens. In this respect, the guides, training curricula and mentoring methodologies tested during the piloting of the model could be put of good use to ensure the development of a ‘critical mass’ of trained educators throughout the country. Additional modules should be introduced in diversity, inclusive education and parental education for educators, but also for social workers and medical staff. A mandatory induction training would be needed for the young, unexperienced educators before they start working in the crèche-group, followed by efficient supervision/mentoring. Kindergartens with outstanding results for children under three could become Government partners in the delivery of in-service training programmes. On a more medium-term perspective, pre-service curricula should be revised to include specific modules on early learning and childhood development from birth to three to ensure that graduates of pedagogic university studies have the required competences to operate in crèche-type services and work with children under three. An internship system for young educators is also recommended to be established. In this process, UNICEF can play a key role in promoting comprehensive professional development for staff working with children under three that in addition to ECE topics also includes training in child development assessments and key knowledge on health, nutrition, child protection, vulnerability, diversity and parenting. • Quality assurance: specific quality assurance procedures should be put in place from the very 	<p>ministries (health, labour and social protection), kindergartens</p> <p>Ministry of Education in partnership with UNICEF, pre-service and in-service training providers, kindergartens</p> <p>Ministry of Education in</p>	<p>2016-2017</p>

No	Recommendations	Addressee	Timing
	<p>beginning to avoid overcrowding of crèche-groups, mitigate staff turnover and enable the achievement of optimal learning and development outcomes for children. A contract with parents might be advisable to provide a more structured and accountable basis for parents' engagement in the early education of their children, in partnership with educators, and endorsement of clear and transparent entry-exit rules for children in the crèche-groups (thus avoiding several shortcomings described in the Effectiveness and Sustainability sections). An essential quality dimension which should be given utmost consideration in preparing the model for scaling up refers to the assessment of learning and development outcomes for children attending the crèche-groups. UNICEF can play a key role in developing jointly with the Ministry of Education a unitary assessment framework and standardised instruments to measure progress and allow timely remedies.</p>	<p>partnership with UNICEF</p>	<p>End 2016</p>
Operational Recommendations (O)			
<p>O1</p>	<p>Carry out a quick inclusiveness assessment of crèche-groups in the target communities supported by UNICEF</p> <p><i>Description:</i></p> <p>As mentioned in the findings section of the report, the evaluation identified several equity issues related to the practices used by the kindergartens in enrolling the children under three in the crèche-groups. The enrolment policy is primarily based on the occupational status of parents and age of children (around 2 years), thus leaving aside vulnerable categories of children, in particular children with disability and Roma children.</p> <p>UNICEF is recommended to carry out a quick assessment of the situation in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and take remedial action in line with the implicit ToC which provides for inclusive coverage of preschool children under three. The assessment would be quantitative and based on a representative sample of families with children under three living in the target communities.</p>	<p>UNICEF and Ministry of Education</p>	<p>2016 (first half)</p>
<p>O2</p>	<p>Conduct a specific costing analysis of unit cost/child enrolled in the crèche-groups piloted by the UNICEF model to serve the rolling out of services nationally</p> <p><i>Description:</i></p> <p>As mentioned in the Efficiency section of the report, the analysis of the unit cost/child attending the crèche-</p>	<p>UNICEF, Ministry of Education</p>	<p>2016 (first half)</p>

No	Recommendations	Addressee	Timing
	<p>groups supported by the Project and comparison with national benchmarks was impeded by the lack of disaggregated financial data at the level of municipality by crèche-group and groups of children above three enrolled in the same kindergarten.</p> <p>Since the evaluation did not have the resources for an in-depth cost analysis needed to construct the unit cost/child, UNICEF is advised to make an amendment to the existing contract with PricewaterhouseCoopers in charge of costing the preschool education services in order to carry out a specific analysis in the Project communities. The analysis would provide an estimate of the overall financial envelope per year and inform UNICEF advocacy with the Government, in particular with the Ministry of Finance, for rolling out the model nationally.</p> <p>Costs of initial investment are already known. Nevertheless, for rolling out purposes, a more accurate financial estimation is needed via a feasibility study to assess the infrastructure rehabilitation costs and the relevance of setting up a crèche-group or alike in a certain location (kindergarten, community), depending on the natality trends and existing infrastructure (space, utilities, etc.), as suggested by participants in the validation round table.</p>		

B. Recommendations for the general improvement of service supply, parenting skills and UNICEF future modelling initiatives

No	Recommendations	Addressee	Timing
Strategic and Programmatic Recommendations (SP)			
SP2	<p>Further invest in the expansion and diversification of country-wide, flexible early learning programmes for children under three to ensure higher and more inclusive coverage of vulnerable children in preschool education</p> <p><i>Description:</i> As mentioned in the Conclusion section, the UNICEF-supported model is not and should not be the only option for children under three and their parents. The development of a services 'market' is needed, based on a wider dialogue about the roles and responsibilities of the state, municipalities, parents, CSOs and private sector in the provision of services for children under three, able to flexibly cover the needs for early</p>	Government of Moldova in partnership with UNICEF, municipalities, CSOs and private sector	2016-2018

	<p>learning and child development. This will be critical to ensuring an enabling and supportive environment for new ECE service provision and for developing a system that is able to support the rights of children and their families, particularly those from the most marginalised backgrounds.</p> <p>Apart from services piloted through the UNICEF model and in line with the Strategy "Education 2020", other types of services should be encouraged to set up and flourish, such as private kindergartens (including company-based ones), professional baby-sitters, early learning and childcare centres in educational institutions for student-mothers, etc. The eligible age threshold of existing early learning community centres should be revisited to allow smaller children under three to benefit. UNICEF may actively get involved in Government-led working groups to support the amendment of the legal framework as far as private services are concerned (to overcome gaps and hurdles, see Context, Sustainability and Conclusion sections) and development of a functional national accreditation system for early learning service providers for children under three (as part of the overall quality assurance system).</p> <p>As far as the private, market-based services are concerned, these have the potential to limit public expenditure, mitigate overcrowding of kindergartens especially in the urban areas and allow greater choice and control for parents; however this should not be allowed to restrict the availability of high quality services for all children and should not replace the public service provision at affordable prices. Low-income families tend to have the greatest need for childcare early and at the lowest possible cost, but often cannot afford market-based ECE services for their children.</p> <p>The report of Expert-Grup on the results of public consultations carried out on 27 March 2015 (supported by UNICEF within the project "Partnership for evidence-based results policies") provides a full record of debates and possible solutions to many of the issues related to the expansion and diversification of services for children under three. The evaluation endorses most of the proposed solutions.</p>		
<p>SP3</p>	<p>Empower parents/caregivers to become active and efficient partners of the education system in the process of early education and development of children under three</p> <p><i>Description:</i> Systematic and culturally-sensitive awareness raising of parents/caregivers on the benefits of early learning (especially of vulnerable parents), but equally on their role in the education of children, followed by empowering actions is of utmost importance. This is not sufficiently well internalised by all parents, hence limited participation of some parents in the educational process of their children and insufficient development of positive parenting skills, as evidenced by this evaluation (section on Effectiveness).</p>	<p>UNICEF in partnership with the Government, kindergartens and CSOs</p>	<p>permanent</p>

	<p>Raising awareness of parents and development of parenting skills should mandatorily complement the expansion and diversification of services, as done by UNICEF model, all the more since the existing supply will hardly cover all needs and there will be, at least on medium-term, many children left under exclusive supervision and care of parents at home. At the same time, empowerment activities are needed to develop parents' capacity to play a meaningful role in the design and monitoring of the quality of early education programmes for their children.</p> <p>UNICEF is best placed to advocate for policies of parental education programmes focused on the most at-risk children (Roma, CwD, children left behind by migrant parents, poor children) and contribute, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, to the development of more systematic involvement of parents as early educators and supporters of young children. In this respect, it is already engaged in many useful initiatives, including in the promotion and development of the recent national parenting strategy which envisages, among many other important provisions, the institutionalisation of the 'parental educator' function, including in the ECE. UNICEF is recommended to play a stronger role in influencing the social norms around the importance of ECE for the realisation of children's rights and their future development. Ingrained prejudices concerning inclusion and participation of CwD and Roma children in early education, as highlighted by the findings of this evaluation, require time and systematic tolerance building efforts until sustainable shifts in cultural norms and values are in place. UNICEF can play a crucial role in embedding diversity and inclusion within preschool environment and practice, starting with influencing an inclusive enrolment policy of kindergartens and providing support for teaching and learning materials that reflect gender, ethnic and linguistic diversity (for instance, translation of educators' guides from Romanian into Russian, as requested by stakeholders from UTAG).</p> <p>Also for parents' empowering reasons, the Government is recommended to encourage employers to ensure flexible work programmes for parents/caregivers of small children. In this respect, the Labour Code provides for the possibility of part-time work at home for parents, while preserving their statutory right to state allowance for upbringing the child. This legal right is largely unknown by parents and hardly encouraged and respected by employers.</p>		
Operational Recommendations (O)			
O3	Improve the results architecture and evaluability of future UNICEF's modelling initiatives	UNICEF	During the programming

	<p><i>Description:</i></p> <p>The ToC of the model was developed retrospectively for the purpose of this evaluation. It is much more useful to construct it at the beginning of an intervention, with the participation of key stakeholders, as outcomes and processes are viewed differently with hindsight. Future pilot interventions should be designed from start in a way which allows their evaluability and performance accountability of both UNICEF and Moldovan partners, with clear baseline indicators and targets, disaggregated by gender, age, disability, residence. It is recommended that a coherent risk mitigation strategy is designed during the programming of the model and regularly reviewed and updated, to inform UNICEF and its partners about risks and constraints of the operating space which could affect the estimated results and guide the prevention and remedial actions, as needed.</p> <p>A very important dimension of the programming process is the integration of equity, quality and inter-sectorality into the monitoring frameworks of UNICEF CO future modelling exercises. Monitoring should be both results and process-based.</p>		<p>and design of any modelling intervention</p>
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6.3 Lessons Learnt

Several key lessons emerge from the issues highlighted in this evaluation:

- 1) **Investment in early preschool education should be long-term.** Long-term investment in early learning and in education generally, based on participative planning, well established priorities and sequential projects that build upon previous results, tested practices and models, will yield tremendous rates of return in the future. There is a rich body of evidence at national and European levels which demonstrates the benefits of investment in early childhood education in particular in the case of vulnerable children. Developmental effects of the services designed, tested and implemented through this Project represent an excellent additional example.
- 2) **Early education services for children under three represent a significant breakthrough for child learning and development outcomes, but most vulnerable and neglected children could still be excluded.** Investment in early childhood education is a promising policy approach to help children from excluded backgrounds to achieve health and development, and to assist their families to engage more effectively with education. Failure to prioritise vulnerability in the enrolment policies of preschool institutions, lack of knowledge and skills in inclusive education of principals and educators on the background of public prejudices, stigma and lack of information about the available services could impede the access of these children to available early education services. There might be also “hidden” children who are not registered in any formal system of care and support. Professional crèche-type services are an effective way to stimulate motor, socio-affective and cognitive of children. However, very rarely CwD and children belonging to disadvantaged ethnic communities benefit of such services, as disability and ethnicity are among the most important determinants which decreases access to preschool education, . Accurate mapping of the most vulnerable children, adequate family information and counselling on statutory rights for early education, efficient referral to appropriate ECE services, inclusive enrolment practices, training and support for specialised educators, empowerment of parents to claim their rights and cope with public intolerance and prejudices are essential prerequisites which should accompany early education services.
- 3) **Expansion of early learning opportunities for children under three requires both hard and soft investment.** Investing in infrastructure rehabilitation and in the procurement of furniture and didactical materials in parallel with the delivery of early education programmes and capacity building of both professionals and parents might be a good mix and a feasible solution for countries where the existing school infrastructure is decrepit and the school network is sub-optimally located across the territory. Any attempt to expand the preschool education for this age group should consider the investment in physical infrastructure, too.